



Comic Conversion of the Canon

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While talking about her experiences as a professional writer Virginia Woolf mentioned two major problems she initially faced. To start writing an individual she had, first of all, to battle with the phantom of an ideal woman. the Angel in the House. This image of the intensely sympathetic, immensely charming and utterly unselfish and sacrificing and pure woman tormented, bothered, and wasted much of her time. Be sympathetic, be tender, flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. But Woolf realized that it was impossible to write without having a mind of one's own. Hence Woolf killed this Angel of the House and became free to think on her own

However this led to another problem because while thinking with her own mind some fresh and strange thoughts also came to the surface. "She had thought of something, something about the body, about. the passion which was unfitting for her as as a woman to say. Men her reason told her, would be shocked. The truth about her passions had roused her from her artist's state of consciousness. She could write no more.

Woolf confessed that she had solved the first problem but she could not completely solve the second problem of openly telling the truth about her own experiences as a body. She dreamed of a time when women writers would solve even this problem and freely write about their minds as well as bodies.

Erica Jong is perhaps the most prominent one among the women artists who celebrated this literary assassination of the Angel of the House and fulfilled the dreams of Virginia Woolf. No other American woman novelist has probably devoted herself so completely and deliberately to tarnish the image of the traditional woman and to voice openly the feelings, emotions, experiences, and desires of the women without any inhibition and in a language hitherto unknown and unimaginable even in men's writings. She has mastered and very skillfully used different techniques and



modes of expressions of the established canon to turn the table against men as Shakespeare's Caliban uses the language learnt from Prospero to curse him.

An excellent example of her utilization of the established literary conventions for expressing her feminist concerns is found in her novel *Fanny*. Here is a woman who is exploiting literature itself to counter the male canonical literature which has been false and biased against women. In *Fanny* Jong uses the conventions of eighteenth century picaresque novel to comment upon the subjugation of women by creating a female protagonist. In a typical picaresque novel (like Fielding's *Tom Jones*, for example) the presentation of the life and history of the protagonist allows the author to provide the detailed picture of the contemporary society. Hence Jong employs the structure and comedy as a means to display the age-old subordination of women. The novel's 18th century background, setting and picaresque mode of narration provides her with limitless opportunities not only for voicing her anger and disgust against women's oppression but also for exposing, ridiculing and criticizing the hypocrisy, selfishness and weaknesses of men. Some of the contemporary attitudes, practices and views of men about women appear very amusing and funny in the modern context as women have proved them wrong by their progress.

In the words of Charlotte Templin *Fanny* is a young orphan who dresses in her foster-brother's clothing and rides off on her horse after being raped by her foster-father, Lord Sellars, to whom she develops an erotic attraction when he reappears in the story. The consequence of the rape is a daughter for whom she writes the memoir that is the novel. She falls in love with the outlaw Lancelot, converts him to heterosexuality, and returns to her Wiltshire birthplace where she finds that she has been bequeathed the estate by Lord Bellars, who is actually her biological father.

In *Fanny* Jong has skillfully used the female protagonist and the removed eighteenth-century imaginary world with a clear purpose. Commenting on her design in writing *Fanny*, she has said, "having explored our right to anger and sexuality in literature, having asserted our right to tell the truths about our lives, we must now also assert our right to explore imaginary and invented worlds."



Fanny was very fond of literature and becomes much excited when Pope comes to the house with Mr. Bellars. She tries to discuss poetry and consult him about her endeavors. But the short and deformed poet was more interested in seducing the innocent, young, and virgin Fanny. The views he expresses about women's literary abilities represent the traditional bias of men. However, if she chooses the sensible Path, and devotes her whole Life to serving a Poet of the Masculine Gender.

Fanny's awe and admiration for the contemporary literary giant renders her helpless to prevent his sexual advances. She was too inexperienced and absorbed in theoretical matters to notice or even understand what was happening. Similarly, as Joanne Duval has also rightly pointed out "The chapter on Swift, detailing his earnest attempts to rouse a stallion to amorous play with Fanny will leave any lover of Gulliver's Travels weeping with laughter. These are a few examples of how Jong uses the canonical literary genres as well as canonical writers to turn the table against men by cutting them to their proper size. She renders them to laughing-stock by exploding the myths of male superiority, virility, and potentialities.

As usual, Jong has discussed sexual experiences, seductions, rapes, pervert sexual activities and lesbian sex very explicitly. Fanny narrates not only how she was pulled towards Poly and how the act of lesbian love was performed. Again, Jong employs the explicit sexual content and the uninhibited language with a clear purpose of claiming equality for women writers. Fanny also bears the pains of pregnancy and childbirth heroically. Men boast of their strength and war-wounds. But a woman bears much more than that. However, that was never noted and appreciated. Here is woman (Fanny/Jong) who not only talks about these things elaborately and without any inhibition but also takes pride in it. The novel ends with Fanny happily settled at her birthplace on the estate bequeathed to her by her father-lover, Mr. Bellars. She also publishes a novel 'Patriot' and becomes a famous literary figure. Even the king invites her. But when it becomes known that the author is a woman, her literary reputation begins to decline. The male reviewers who had praised her work, now find faults with it. However, Fanny is not disheartened. She has completed her journey. She has learned the greatest truth about life. Thus Fanny is a typical example of how certain



American women writers are using canonical forms to fight against their misrepresentation in literature.

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