

(DE)WRITING WOMEN IN THE CANON OF BRITISH POSTGRADUATE STUDIES

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RESUMEN

Las clases de literatura en lengua inglesa se han centrado tradicionalmente en escritores hombres, estando dominadas por autores como Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Coleridge o Joyce. Los hombres gobiernan los programas de literatura, o lo que es lo mismo, el canon de literatura inglesa. Aunque las universidades están habitadas por numerosas estudiantes y profesoras, parece que predomina el estudio de escritores. Por esta razón, este trabajo pretende comprobar empíricamente si dicha suposición es cierta. Para ello, se centrará en los programas de postgrado ofrecidos por la mitad de los departamentos de inglés de las universidades británicas, teniendo en cuenta dos parámetros principales: el tipo de universidad («ancient», «red brick» y «new») y el periodo/tema en el que los masters se centran (Romanticismo, periodo victoriano, el siglo XX y las literaturas postcoloniales, «nacionales» y de mujeres).

PALABRAS CLAVE: canon literario, escritoras, estudios de postgrado, universidades británicas, programas universitarios.

ABSTRACT

Lessons on literature written in English have tended to focus on male writers, being dominated by authors such as Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Coleridge or Joyce. Men govern literature syllabuses, or what is the same, the canon of English literature. Although universities are inhabited by numerous female students and professors, the writers dealt with still seem to be predominantly male. For this reason, the present paper intends to check empirically if this common assumption is true. To do so, it will focus on the postgraduate programmes offered by half the British universities' English departments, taking into account two major parameters: the university type (ancient, red brick or new) and the period/subject the master deals with (Romanticism, the Victorian period, the 20th century and colonial, «national» and women's literatures).

KEY WORDS: Literary canon, women writers, postgraduate studies, British universities, university syllabuses.



INTRODUCTION

Tertiary education represents one of the oldest institutions in Britain, some of its universities having been founded in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance. It is also a field on which numerous battles have been fought and which has never been free from controversy. In the nineteenth century, one of the main functions of universities was to provide the means for the children of the upper-classes to socialize. Less than one per cent of the British population received some form of higher education, very few of which were women. The expansion of the university system beyond Oxbridge, which took place subsequently, depended on voluntarism, and its aim was to extend education to other members of society beyond the aristocracy or, at best, the bourgeoisie. Female students had to fight then for their right to receive an education, being repeatedly barred from it due to their sex. In fact, Cambridge did not allow the graduation of female students till as late as 1947¹. In contrast, nowadays thirty per cent of British youngsters attend the different universities and colleges throughout the country, and more than fifty per cent of these students are women. Discrimination according to gender among students is, fortunately, a phenomenon of the past, but when it comes to the study of literature we may wonder if the discrimination of authors according to gender is not still a phenomenon of the present. Such an issue is inevitably linked to present-day discussions on the canon of English literature, a subject which has lately become a site of contest. Women have traditionally been excluded from the canon, as have been many other authors for various reasons. This has been the case, for instance, of black writers, not to mention black women authors. Although there is a tendency to open up the canon and include traditionally peripheral or marginal writers, what is undeniable is that academic institutions have the power to «validate» texts and, therefore, authors. Through the design of university syllabuses, they control the writers that are studied and, to some extent, those who are read, as well as the interpretation of their texts.

The number of women writers who are studied in British postgraduate programmes has not been investigated, not to our knowledge. For this reason, and because of the increasing debate on the canon, in which the most celebrated academics all over the world are getting involved, we have decided to devote our study to such topic. As Pozuelo points out: «El vendaval que la deconstrucción, los estudios de crítica feminista y los llamados cultural studies han promovido en el mundo académico norteamericano ha sido tan fuerte que ha hecho emerger con creciente aire polemista esa vieja cuestión de la teoría del canon»². Therefore, the aim of this paper is to find out how many women writers are studied at the different postgraduate programmes depending on the period or subject they deal with (*i.e.* Ro-

¹ A. HAYTON and A. PACZUSKA, «The right to education». *The Guardian* (Friday August 30, 2002). <http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/books/story/0,,783387,00.html> (7th February 2007).

² J.M. POZUELO YVANCOS, *Teoría del canon y literatura española*. Madrid, Cátedra, 2000, p. 17.

matic, Victorian period, Modernism and so on) taking into account the university type as well, that is, whether it is an ancient, Red Brick or new institution. To do so, this paper will consist of the following parts: study (data, data collection procedure and method), results, discussion and conclusion.

1. STUDY

1.1. DATA

There are ninety universities in the UK, twenty-two of which have been analyzed. Originally, we planned to examine 25%, but reached the conclusion that, since not all the universities have postgraduate programmes or even an English department, we had to be more selective. There are four different types of universities on the British Isles (Ancient Universities, Red Brick, New Universities and Post-1992 Universities or old polytechnics); we decided to analyze approximately 50% of the first three groups, which were deemed the ones more likely to include postgraduate programmes on English literature. Ancient Universities are those founded before the 19th century; they are medieval or renaissance universities. Four of the seven so-called ancient universities have been analyzed: Oxford, Edinburgh, St. Andrews and Trinity College Dublin. Red Brick Universities were created in the 19th and early 20th century in the industrial cities of England. They admitted men without reference to religion or background and emphasised practical rather than theoretical knowledge as done in Oxford or Cambridge. There are fifteen Red Brick Universities in the country, eight of which have been examined: Leeds, Liverpool, Hull, Newcastle, Leicester, Dundee, Wales (Swansea) and *University College (London)*. There are two types of new universities: those founded in the 1960s or Plate Glass Universities and those created in or after 1992. The latter refer mainly to the old polytechnics which were given the status of universities when the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 came into effect. Since traditionally these institutions specialized in technology and vocational training, they do not usually offer studies on English literature or even postgraduate programmes. For this reason, it has been decided not to take post-1992 universities into account for our study. With regard to Plate Glass Universities—which will be also simply called new universities—we have studied ten out of twenty: York, Bath, Bradford, Essex, Lancaster, East Anglia, Kent, Keele, Salford and Surrey. As mentioned above, we have examined around 50% of the universities belonging to the types included. It should be noticed that not all the universities analyzed offer postgraduate programmes on English literature, although the great majority do, but we have included them for our study to be more representative of the situation of British universities.

We have analyzed the total number of 47 master programmes in the different universities mentioned above. Some universities' English departments offer up to four or five masters, but not all of them were relevant for our purpose. Owing to our interest in the study of the female authors, there was no point in including



those programmes that concentrated on Medieval or Renaissance literature. Most of the texts that have reached us from the Middle Ages are anonymous, for the concept of authorship had not been developed yet. Women began to write more professionally and to be known in the public sphere as writers around the Restoration period. Nevertheless, there are no programmes that focus on the Restoration itself, but we can only find masters on Renaissance literature in general. Therefore, we have considered those masters dealing with the Romantic period onwards. On collecting the data, some other types of postgraduate programmes have been found, such as those on creative writing (which are becoming very popular and are offered by many an English department) or those on translation and linguistics. None of these groups has obviously been considered. With regard to the authors and works studied, we have focused only on those writers who are part of the English literary world. The University of Essex, for instance, includes in one of its syllabuses a course on Hispanic authors, where they deal with García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Such authors have not been included, for that would go beyond the purpose of this study. Likewise, we have concentrated on the primary reading lists required in the different courses offered in each postgraduate programme. Nevertheless, the theoretical readings have not been taken into account, that is, if the University of Edinburgh asks students taking a master on twentieth-century literature to read Baudrillard and Lyotard, these authors, who are theorists rather than creative writers, have not been counted for the present paper.

1.1.2. *Data collection procedure*

In order to collect the data for this study, we have used one main source: the internet. All the information concerning the authors studied in the different courses was retrieved from the web. This procedure entailed, however, one major disadvantage: some universities do not publish their reading lists, since they consider them as course materials, only available for those students who are actually enrolled on the course. This is the case, for instance, of Britain's most prestigious universities, Oxford and Cambridge. Due to the unavailability of these reading lists, some e-mails were sent to the universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Birmingham, asking them for this information. Of them, only Oxford replied providing us with the materials required. Although the English department of the University of Birmingham also answered our e-mail, no reading lists were finally supplied; so this university, together with Cambridge, was finally not included in the current study. Owing to the physical distance, the internet was our only way of having access to the information necessary for this research. Yet the problems we had to face meant that our study could not be as random as was originally intended. We had to select those universities whose reading lists had been posted on the web (or were privately provided). Nonetheless, some of the universities included here offer no masters on English literature. This is the case of the universities of Bath and Bradford, whose English departments are focused on linguistics and translation, or *University College (London)*, which does offer masters on literature but not relevant for our re-



search, since they deal with Medieval literature and Shakespeare. Nevertheless, it has been considered interesting to include these universities for this study to be more representative, since obviously not all the universities in the UK have English departments, let alone, postgraduate programmes on English literature.

Once we had found the universities whose reading lists were available online, we proceeded to count the male and female authors studied in each of the courses offered in the different programmes. When in the same subject or module several works by one author were studied, the author was counted only once, but if this writer was also studied in a different subject s/he was counted again, for it meant that this writer was considered more important and influential. Some universities offer courses which are common to several masters. In this case, the authors studied have been counted only once.

1.2. METHOD

The method followed in this research has been the one proposed by empirical sociologists of literature such as Verdaasdonk, also pursued by other scholars, namely, Rosengren or Mann, all of them publishing in the journal *Poetics*. Nowadays there are two tendencies in the sociology of literature: an empirical approach, represented by the above mentioned authors, and a more hermeneutic or phenomenological approach³. In this essay the first one will be followed. Verdaasdonk⁴ defends an empirical and non-textually oriented line of work in which research problems should be precise and well-defined, and hypotheses testable. He criticizes traditional sociology in which the critic makes positive or negative value judgments. Likewise Verdaasdonk is against the overuse of linguistics made by some sociologists, who have traditionally tried to defend their value judgments through linguistic properties. He prefers to use statistics and quantitative data instead. For this reason, Verdaasdonk takes into account external elements such as literary institutions, and proposes counting the references to a text or the amount of attention an institution pays to it to determine more objectively the quality of the work of literature. Literary institutions tend to do a qualitative ranking of texts or to classify them according to author, period, genre and original language. Within the literary institutions, the academic ones are more important than publishing houses, newspapers or magazines when it comes to the ranking of literary texts, because they do not change their views so much. Their qualitative judgements change slowly and

³ The hermeneutic method has been defended by sociologists such as Mary Rogers, who claims that the function of literature is that of connecting readers with their predecessors and with their successors. Literature has to do with beauty; it is an aesthetic pleasure whose end is to tell a story, to express meaning.

⁴ H. VERDAASDONK, «Empirical Sociology of Literature as a non-textually oriented form of research». *Poetics*, vol. 14 (1985), pp. 173-185.

they tend to deal with old literary texts more often than the other institutions. For our study, this empirical approach to the sociology of literature will be followed. Some other scholars, besides Verdaasdonk, who may have influenced us are Rosengren and Mann⁵. The former developed a form of empirical study known as the mentions technique, which he claims to be an application of psychology association theory to literary sociology. In reviews, reviewers often mention other writers apart from the one being reviewed; these are what Rosengren calls «mentions», which measure how much «alive» an author is, that is, to what extent s/he survives in the reviewers' memories. So, by means of the mentions technique, Rosengren attempts to measure fame. Peter H. Mann has carried out an empirical study about romantic fiction readers, analysing first which is the most widely read genre and drawing later a statistical study of the gender, social class, age and profession of those who read romantic fiction.

The present paper will follow this empirical approach to the sociology of literature, offering a non-textual and quantitative survey about the number of female authors studied at British universities in postgraduate programmes. As Verdaasdonk mentioned, we are focusing on literary institutions, in this case the academic ones, since they also play a role in the selection and ranking of authors. We have tried to carry out an objective study and, for this purpose, have used the support of statistics. So, after counting the authors studied in the different courses, these numbers have been transformed into percentages for them to be more representative as well as comparable with those of other universities.

2. RESULTS

It is certainly interesting to study the number of female authors included in the syllabuses depending on the type of postgraduate programme. The divisions have been made mainly according to the period the master focuses on. In this way, we have obtained the categories of Romantic, Victorian and twentieth-century masters, since in the previous epochs not many women wrote and fewer published. Some other categories considered are postcolonial studies, «national» literatures (mainly Irish or Scottish), women studies and «others», a miscellaneous group where we have included some masters on science fiction and cultural studies. In some of the first categories, the university type has also been taken into account.

The Romantic period meant the explosion of writing by women. With authors such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley and Jane Austen, it seemed that women had finally managed to get hold of the pen. But are the syllabuses of eighteenth-century literature courses representative of such a revolution? If we have a look at figure two, we can notice that ancient universities include a minimum of

⁵ K.E. ROSENGREN, «Time and literary fame». *Poetics*, vol. 14 (1985), pp. 157-172. P.H. MANN, «Romantic fiction and its readership». *Ibidem*, pp. 95-105.

female authors in their masters on Romantic literature (only 12% of the writers are female), and it is new universities that include most female authors. Actually, the number of women writers studied overtakes that of men (63,16 versus 36,84 per cent), whereas Red Brick universities stay more conventional and give much more importance to male authors. Probably the reason for some of these remarkable results is that two of the new universities examined, York and Lancaster, have masters on eighteenth-century literature, where subjects such as *Women, Poetry and the Novel in the 1790s* or *Femininity and Literary Culture: English Women Writers and the Politics of the 1790s* are offered. This fact obviously makes the number of women authors present in these courses' reading lists increase dramatically.

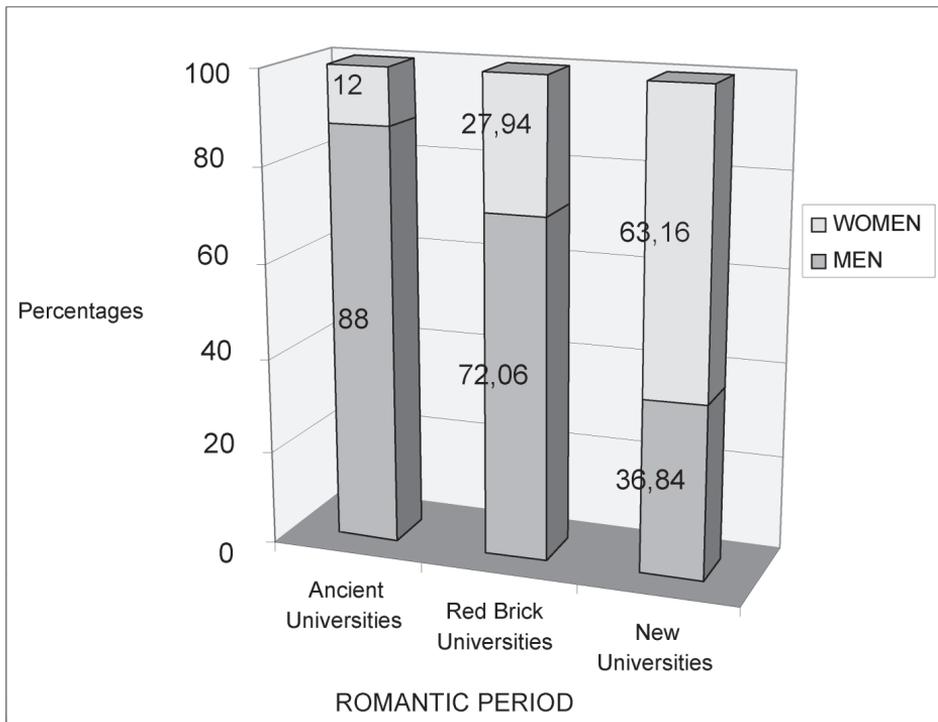


Figure 1.

The Victorian period also witnessed the birth of many a woman writer; one only has to consider the Brontë sisters, who immediately come to mind when talking about Victorian female writers. One's expectation would be that in this period more female authors be studied, for women were gaining ground, despite the restrictions of the period, as writers. Many of them had to publish under male pseudonyms, as is the well-known case of Emily, Charlotte and Anne Brontë, initially known as Ellis, Currer and Acton Bell. Yet our hope on approaching this study is

that the writings of these Victorian female authors have survived, and since they wrote in a period which is closer to ours that, if originally silenced, they have been rediscovered.

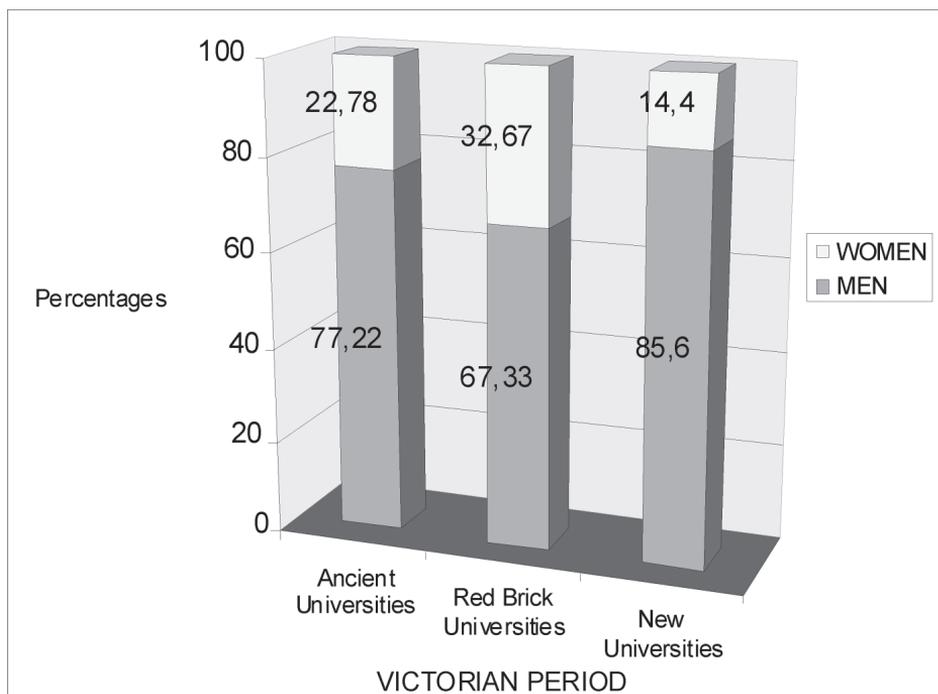


Figure 2.

Figure three shows that effectively more women are studied in the masters on Victorian than Romantic literature as far as ancient and Red Brick universities are concerned. Nevertheless, in this case numbers are more even, and the difference between one type of university and another is minimal. Certainly, new universities do not include so many female authors in their syllabuses as they did in the case of Romantic literature. On the contrary, unexpectedly it is Plate Glass universities that include the smallest number of female authors in their syllabuses on this occasion, since only 14% of the writers studied are women.

Concerning twentieth-century literature, the obvious expectation we have on approaching this type of postgraduate programme is one: equality. The twentieth century has seen the rise of feminism and the proliferation of authors such as Virginia Woolf and Angela Carter. After the First World War, the world changed for women; they had access to jobs and careers, and could take up professions which had been traditionally barred to them. But although it is true that more female authors are included in these courses' reading lists, the number is not so

large as might be expected. There is not a very big difference between one university type and another. In ancient and new ones, only around 30% of the writers studied are women. As seen in the first section, it is Red Brick universities that give more importance to female authors, for almost half the writers included in their syllabuses are in this case women, as shown in figure four.

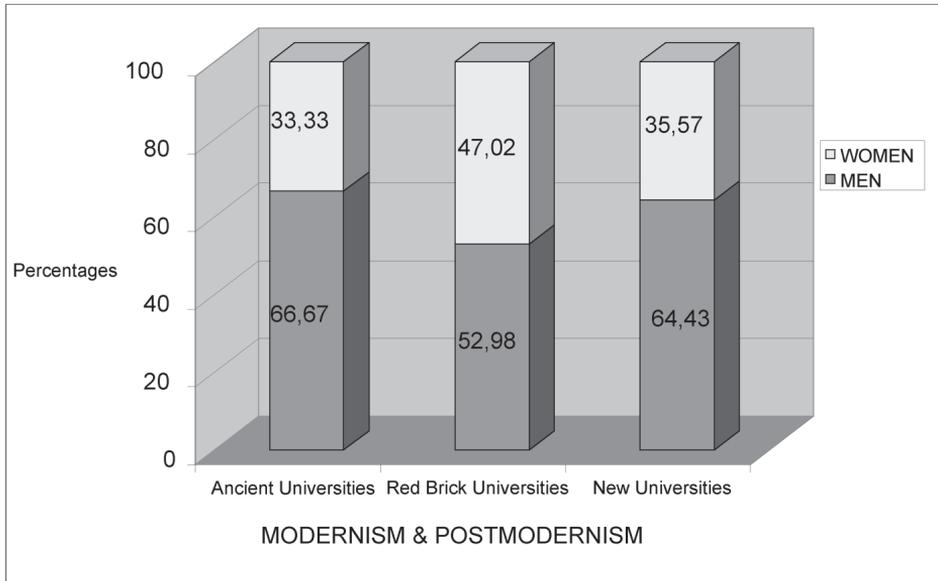


Figure 3.

Yet which is the real difference between the number of female and male authors studied in one period and another? Which is the difference according to the type of subject the programme focuses on? Up to now, we have analyzed the three most important literary periods, as far as the presence of women writers is concerned, bearing in the mind the type of university, but one of the most interesting parts of this study is to analyze which is the difference not only between one period and another but between the subjects some other masters deal with. If we consider all the universities examined together as a whole, we have that in the masters which focus on the Romantic period, as mentioned above, most of the authors studied are male: 56,38% versus 43,62%. If the difference between the number of male and female authors studied is not as great as could be expected it is due to the huge number of women writers included in some of the new universities' syllabuses. In contrast if we focus on Victorian postgraduate programmes, we can see that the great majority of writers are male, in fact more than 70% of them. It seems surprising that more female authors are dealt with in masters on Romantic than on Victorian literature. There certainly were important male authors in the

Victorian period, but also in the Romantic one, and if the nineteenth century is Dickens', the eighteenth century is Coleridge's and Wordsworth's. As mentioned above, the situation is a bit more egalitarian when it comes to Modernism and Postmodernism, but still not quite. In this case, almost 60% of the writers are men and 40%, women. It is surprising that, if the twentieth century is the time of equality, the difference between the number of male and female authors studied is still considerable.

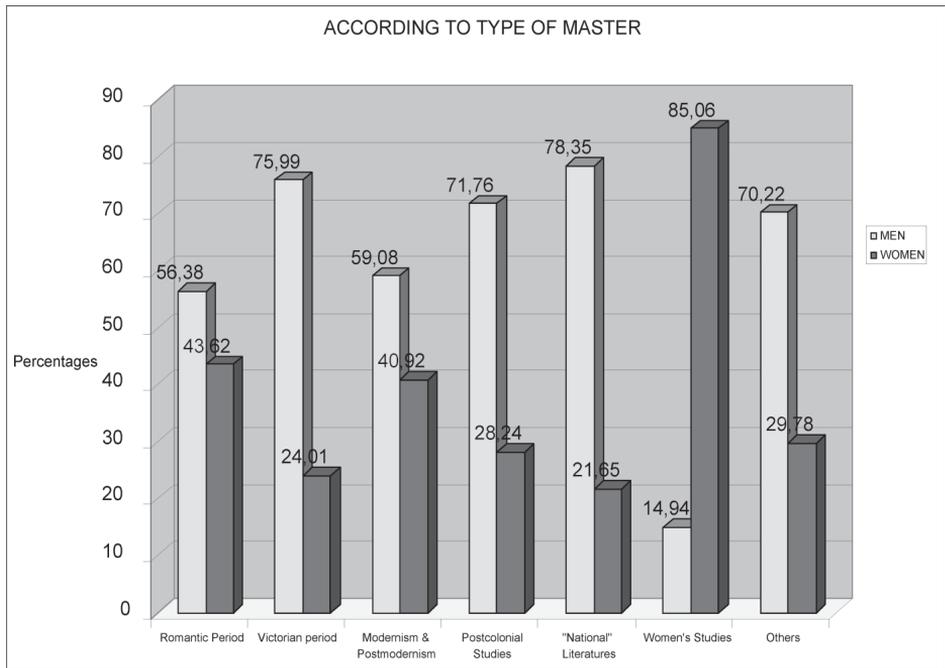


Figure 4.

These three categories, Romantic, Victorian and twentieth-century literature, are the ones considered above also depending on the type of university. We have taken into account besides some other postgraduate programmes which focus on certain topics: postcolonial, «national» and women's literature. The former comes to us as a shock. The usual expectation would be for masters on postcolonial studies to include approximately the same number of male and female writers or at least attempt to be egalitarian. These masters often emerge from the desire of scholars from the former colonies to claim their own identity as a nation and denounce the metropolis as an oppressor. So, black, Indian and other scholars decide to set a master where they study Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipul and J.M. Coetzee. However, instead of the expected equality, what we find in postcolonial syllabuses is that more than 70% of the authors studied are again men whereas only 29% are women.

This situation is quite remarkable, since postcolonial studies, which supposedly fight against racial discrimination, are adhering to gender discrimination. They denounce the oppression of the metropolis, but not that of patriarchy.

A similar, and equally shocking, situation is what we find in the case of «national» literatures. Masters on Scottish, Welsh and Irish literature seem to be emerging and, like in the case of postcolonial studies, their intention is to enhance their cultural background, where literature is of course included. These are the «national» literatures from the regions of the British Isles which have been historically invaded, oppressed and exploited by England. For all these reasons, one would also expect them to be more «generous» when it comes to the inclusion of female authors in their syllabuses. Nevertheless, this does not seem to be the case, for almost 80% of the writers in these programmes are male whereas only 20% are women. This situation begs the further question: didn't Scottish women write? They probably did, but what seems to be a fact is that women have traditionally written about what they know, that is, about domestic environments. So, since these programmes on «national» literatures probably tend to emphasize political issues, such as invasion and oppression, it is understandable why Scottish or Irish women writers have been left out, and a similar reason can be given to account for the state of affairs in postcolonial studies.

The final group included, apart from our miscellaneous category, is that of women writers. Nowadays, some universities offer masters devoted to women's studies or women's literature, like the ones in Trinity College, the University of Liverpool or the University of Hull. Obviously, most of the authors studied here are women (85%), although it is still remarkable that some male authors are included (15%). Finally, in the category of «others», which includes some masters on science fiction, cultural studies and life writing, the great majority of the authors included are male, presenting a similar situation to what we found in categories such as Victorian, postcolonial and «national» literature: in all these cases more than 70% of the writers dealt with are men.

To conclude this section, as was expected, masters on twentieth-century literature present the largest number of female authors (apart from masters on women's writing), although the programmes on the Victorian period contain fewer women writers than those on Romanticism. Quite surprisingly, postcolonial and «national» literature postgraduate studies include very few women, contrasting with the vast number of male authors. The results obtained show that the number of female writers studied at postgraduate levels is appalling in comparison to that of male authors.

3. DISCUSSION

This study meant to offer a view on the number of female writers studied in master programmes at British universities. As was expected very few women writers are included in the syllabuses in comparison with the number of male authors. Those postgraduate programmes dealing with twentieth-century literature



included more female authors than those focusing on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What has surprised us has been the small number of female authors studied in masters on postcolonial and «national» literatures, for one could imagine scholars rebelling not only against the oppression of the metropolis, but also against the oppression of patriarchy, or at least to show some solidarity with the cause of female writers. This situation begs the further question of why so few female writers are studied in the syllabuses of English literature in comparison with male writers. The first answer that may come to mind, although an inaccurate one, would be that men have traditionally written more than women, that is, we study more male authors because there are more than female ones. Another possible answer would be that women have traditionally written about domesticity, about everyday life, and this subject, when compared with the more political writings often produced by men, has tended to be devalued. In other words, whereas women have written about the private sphere, men have tended to do it about the public one. This discussion about how much or how little men and women have written was already going on as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Jane Austen wrote *Persuasion*, a novel in which some references to our topic can be found:

But let me observe that all histories are against you-all stories, prose and verse. If I had such a memory as Benwick, I could bring you fifty quotations in a moment on my side the argument, and I do not think I ever opened a book in my life which had not something to say upon woman's inconstancy...But, perhaps, you will say, these were all written by men. Perhaps I shall. Yes, yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything⁶.

This discussion between Austen's heroine and one of the male characters already touches on our subject of debate. The pen has certainly tended to be in male hands, and this is maybe one of the reasons why so few female writers are studied; but we should not forget that the canon of English literature has also been in their hands. Male scholars have traditionally decided which authors are canonical, and therefore should be studied at university, and which are not. The canon is chosen by dominant social groups, schools or institutions. On the one hand, we may think that in effect women have written less than men; on the other, we should also consider how much of this female writing has been left out of the canon by male critics and scholars. In other words, are there very few women in the canon of English literature because they have not written much or because what they wrote has been deemed unimportant or uninteresting, not worth including in our reduced list of books to read and study before one dies?

⁶ J. AUSTEN, *Persuasion*. London, Penguin Popular Classics, 1994, p. 235.

Establishing a canon implies judging, evaluating which texts are left out and which are not. The canon is a construct and through the changes it has undergone throughout history we can see the process of building up. There must always be a reason, an explanation behind each choice and behind every author that is left out, as Pozuelo⁷ suggests. As has been seen in the present study, universities contribute to this process of building up the canon; by including some authors and not others, they are establishing the canon of English literature, one in which the number of female authors is much smaller than that of male writers.

The English canon was not constituted till the nineteenth century, and has been defined by Bloom⁸ as a catalogue of approved authors. The canon is variable; it depends on aesthetic principles which are changeable. Bloom in his famous work *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* establishes his own literary canon, where curiously enough out of twenty-six authors only four are women. He claims to include the writers he considers authoritative to our culture, and approaches them with nostalgia, as can be seen in the very title of his first chapter, «An Elegy for the Canon». Nowadays, Bloom asserts, «things have... fallen apart, the center has not held, and mere anarchy is in the process of being unleashed upon what used to be called 'the learned world'»⁹. He claims that these twenty-six authors are selected «for their sublimity and their representative nature»¹⁰; so we may wonder if only four female authors are sublime and representative of our culture. Isn't it rather that Bloom is talking about *his* male, patriarchal culture? The critic claims that authors are canonical because of their strangeness and originality. This assertion seems to explain his disregard for female authors, who as mentioned above have mainly written about their domestic life, something Bloom probably considers neither strange nor original. He does not restrict himself to the canon of English or American literature, but also includes French and Spanish writers. It is even more shocking then that only four women, Jane Austen, Emily Dickinson, George Eliot and Virginia Woolf, are worth considering as members of the Western canon in the last two thousand years. Besides, in his «Elegy for the Canon», Bloom constantly forgets about female authors as he continues mentioning Milton, Beckett and, of course, Shakespeare, whom the critic worships throughout the book, describing him as the centre of the Western Canon. Bloom has very traditional and reactionary ideas. One cannot forget, for instance, that feminism is one of the branches of what he calls the School of Resentment, as he complains about feminists' attempts to open up the canon in order to include more female writers.

Nevertheless, there are many more women writers than the ones we have usually heard of, that is, the few ones that find their way to the syllabuses of English

⁷ *Op. cit.*

⁸ H. BLOOM, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. London, Macmillan, 1995.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 2.



literature. Elaine Showalter, for instance, in her famous work *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*¹¹, mentions many marginal and unknown nineteenth-century female authors, such as Mary Cholmondeley, Flora Annie Steel, Fanny Penny, Margaret Barber or Mrs. Henry Wood. Everyone has heard of Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë but no one of Ada Cambridge and Dora Greenwell. Institutions of education have played a role in the selection of writers and in the ignorance of many female authors, as our study suggests. Not only have academics contributed to this process, but also anthologies and histories of literature. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*¹², for one, seems to be struggling to include more women writers, and although authors such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Mary Wollstonecraft have already been anthologized, writers as canonical as Jane Austen have not.

Going back to the issue of the canon, Pozuelo defends a more tolerant and easygoing position than Bloom. The former wonders who is working on the modification of the canon and in which way, who is contributing to the mobility within the canon and who preventing it. Literary movements, anthologies and aesthetic manifestoes, Pozuelo claims, are all collaborating in the mobility of the canon. In our case, universities and the scholars who design the syllabuses are the ones contributing to change or fix it. Harris¹³ defines the functions of the canon: it supplies models of morality and ideals of inspiration, transmits some inherited thoughts, creates some common cultural frames, legitimizes a theory and offers a view of the changing visions of the world at different historical moments. For Harris, a canon is constituted according to how texts are read. It does not depend so much on the texts themselves as on how we read them. Kermode¹⁴ presents a similar idea and, although defending the Western canon like Bloom, does it for different reasons. Texts, he claims, survive mainly because critics comment on them and not so much for the texts themselves. These comments change from one generation to another, just as the needs of society change, but what matters is to go on talking. A continuous attention and interpretation is the basic criteria that allows for a text's canonicity. Hence, for Kermode, the changing opinions on a text are what allow us to transform an object without destroying it; this is what he regards as the canon.

Because society's needs change, ours is a generation in which marginalized groups, such as women or racial minorities, are trying to catch up in many of the domains of life, literature included. This fact can be seen in the growing tendency to include more options on women's literature and gender issues in general or in the

¹¹ E. SHOWALTER, *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1977.

¹² M.H. ABRAMS and S. GREENBLATT (eds.) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. New York, Norton, 2000 (7th ed.).

¹³ W. HARRIS, «La canonicidad», in E. SULLÁ (ed.), *El canon literario*, Madrid, Arco/Libros, 1998, pp. 38-60, in POZUELO, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ F. KERMODE, *Formas de atención*. Barcelona, Gedisa, 1988, *ibidem*.

proliferation of postgraduate programmes on postcolonial studies. Universities, and in this case their postgraduate syllabuses, establish what to read and which authors are worth reading, although the current state of affairs suggests that disagreements about the canon within the academia are bound to go on. Despite the present attempt to enhance the study of marginalized groups, it seems that when it comes to women, as Jane Austen claimed, the pen has always been in men's hands, both male writers' and scholars'. Obviously, we have been unable to include in our research all the British universities, but since we have examined around fifty per cent of all them, excluding the former polytechnics, it should be quite representative of the situation in British postgraduate programmes. Studies like ours reveal that sometimes female writers are very much disregarded and that, in spite of the present tendency to set more options on women's writing, there is still a long way to go.

4. CONCLUSION

The aim proposed at the beginning of this paper was discovering how much importance was given to female authors in British postgraduate studies, focusing on the different periods and subjects masters dealt with. Bearing in mind the results obtained and in relation to the goal originally established we can reach the following conclusions: when considering the type of master analyzed, it is surprising to find that there is not a regular and progressive increase in the number of female authors studied, for masters on Victorian literature include fewer women than those on the Romantic period. Programmes on twentieth-century literature present, of course, a more balanced number of male and female writers. Nevertheless, in programmes on postcolonial and «national» literatures, the number of male authors studied is much larger than that of female ones, and it is surprising that whereas these fields of study tend to react against racial discrimination, they are gender biased. Masters on women's literature present the reverse situation: very few male authors are dealt with. To sum up, as has been shown, the number of female writers being studied at postgraduate levels is appalling in comparison with that of men. Women's writing has not focused on politics, history or invasions. On the contrary, it has traditionally been domestic; women have tended to write about private lives, about what goes on in the drawing-room and not on the battlefield. Hence, the fact that they have traditionally written about the private domain, and not about the public one like men, may be one of the reasons that account for their having been ignored by academics. But we should not forget that these scholars and academic institutions are, by doing so, setting the canon of English literature; they are judging and validating texts and authors, and still putting the pen in male hands.