

Expression Through Writing

By Valerie M. Buck

The evolution in the Western world toward individuals who express themselves through writing has been a lengthy process. Before the arrival of the printing press, the number of Medieval people who could share their voice through writing was severely limited. Only the educated elite could read and write, meaning royalty, nobility, and court and religious officials, the vast majority of whom were men.

The number of readers was even more limited because of the scarcity of books. Scribes, usually monks, laboriously copied books out by hand, taking years to complete the longest ones. These books were enormously expensive, each existing with only a handful of copies. Or, all too often there was only one copy.

For these reasons, writing as a means for individuals to express themselves was rare. Common people who chose to live by their pen – and who knew how to write – usually sought rich and noble patrons to support them. Such was the case of Geoffrey Chaucer, son of a rich vintner who could pay for his son's education. Chaucer enjoyed the patronage of the English Duke John of Gaunt, son of King Edward III. In the dream poem *The Boke of the Duchesse*, written around 1368,¹ Chaucer praised the duke's beloved wife Blanche, who had died. Its success with the Duke helped Chaucer to continue writing. In the last ten years of his life Chaucer produced the timeless English classic, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca.1391-1400). Its timelessness is due in great part to how each tale illuminates the lives of common people as Chaucer saw them.

Very few women found the means and the liberty to write. Of those who did, some were nuns. Some were royalty or nobility. Christine de Pisan, however, was a common woman, daughter of a court astrologer in France who provided her with an education. When her husband's death left her alone with three children, Christine supported herself as a scribe. At the same time she wrote poetry and prose, most notably producing *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), one of the earliest endeavors into what would later be labeled as feminist thought.² She described the life of women in several social groups, in the process illuminating her intellect and well-trained reasoning abilities. However, because Christine de Pisan died ten years before the invention of movable type, everything she wrote and distributed had to be made available in handwriting.

¹ Weir, Alison. *Mistress of the Monarchy: The Life of Katherine Swynford, Duchess of Lancaster*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2009.

² Cantor, Norman F. *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993.

With the arrival of the printing press circa 1439,³ book production became so simplified that it monumentally increased the number of “unofficial” people able to contribute their voices to written culture. The upsurge first appeared in academic, political, and religious writing. Eventually it spread to other genres such as poetry and fiction, available formerly only to the rich except in the case of storytelling from memory.

Printing slowly expanded access of books to anyone who could read. It led to the birth of the middle-class reader, whose growing taste for poetry and fiction, in turn, began to support authors who otherwise did not have the financial freedom to write.⁴ In 1476 William Caxton brought the first printing press to England, where he immediately began printing Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (1476-1478). He chose *The Canterbury Tales* because of its appeal to all levels of society and thus was a book that would attract a great number of readers.⁵

A significant leap in the evolution of written culture occurred in Great Britain in the eighteenth century with the blossoming of the book trade and the introduction of circulating libraries. Circulating libraries, which allowed readers access to books for a low fee, had such an impact on the book trade that publishers could predict the success or failure of their publications by how many books the largest circulating libraries would buy.⁶ Growth of the written culture continued into the nineteenth century when the Industrial Revolution improved the printing press as well as produced less expensive paper. Combined with reform that provided education for all social classes, an explosive increase in reading material (especially in periodicals and serialized novels) fed an intensive growth in the reading public.

The Victorians produced authors in numbers never before seen. Women writers especially, such as Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Gaskell, found new freedom in expressing themselves in writing. Still, several women authors, such as George Eliot, the Brontë sisters, Lucas Malet, and Louisa May Alcott, published at least some of their work under male pseudonyms or with initials that appeared male. They found more freedom in doing so, and hoped to reach a broader readership. The practice continues today, as with J.K. Rowling and H.B. Moore. Some Victorian men also wrote under pseudonyms, such as Lewis Carroll, Charles Dickens, and William Makepeace Thackeray. Again, the reason was more freedom to express their ideas, perhaps simply wishing to keep their personal lives from intersecting – and possibly interfering – with their public voices. Likewise, men continue the practice today, for example, Orson Scott Card who has written under at least five pseudonyms.

The novel matured with the improvements in publishing, and became the most popular literary form of the Victorian Age. Authors befriended each other, critiqued each other (Thackeray was a

³ Man, John. *Gutenberg: How One Man Remade the World with Words*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002.

⁴ Lovett, Robert Morss. *The History of the Novel in England*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1932.

⁵ Olmert, Michael. *The Smithsonian Book of Books*. Washington: Smithsonian Books, 1992.

⁶ Tuchman, Gaye, with Nina Fortin. *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

prolific critic), and formed literary circles that became a fixed part of the culture. For example, Dickens was a close friend of Edward Bulwer Lytton, even naming one of his children after him. Thackeray submitted drawings for Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* before someone else got the job.⁷ Lewis Carroll took photographs of Christina Rossetti's famous brother, and the Rossettis' uncle was Lord Byron's physician. Arthur Conan Doyle wrote to Robert Louis Stevenson to say that Stevenson's "The Pavilion on the Links" was the best story he had ever read.⁸ More recently, many Mormon authors befriend and support each other, as with the writers' guild, LDStorymakers. The intersecting of authors' lives with other authors seems an important part of the illumination taking place in the writers' minds.

One of the earliest American poets, colonist Anne Bradstreet, sent her poetry to England to be published. But the book trade grew in America with the colonists. Printed political self-expression played an important part in the American Revolution. The writing of literary Americans matured over time, producing authors in the nineteenth century, such as Louisa May Alcott and Walt Whitman, whose contributions to American literature caught the attention of British writers. The United States spread westward, and so did its literature, providing a landscape to stir the imagination of authors like Zane Grey.

Mormon pioneers brought the printing press to Utah. Eliza R. Snow published several poems in Ohio newspapers before emigrating to Utah, where she continued to publish. The appearance of Mormon novels took a while, but they came, perhaps first of note in Nephi Anderson's *Added Upon* (1898), which illuminates the LDS view of existence from pre-Earth life to the afterlife. Today Mormon authors are establishing themselves in many genres with national and international readers, sharing their ideas with the world. The literary world has become so rich and complex that old geographical and literary boundaries have blurred and faded. Publishing houses abound, and any child with a dream can choose to be a writer.

Writing as self-expression, and the long process involved in achieving a published work, has changed over the years, especially with the introduction of the Internet. But the basic steps of illuminating the writer's mind remain the same: from idea conception, to planning it out, to writing, rewriting, editing, and publishing.

And to reading. Writers have often been influenced by what they have read, allowing the thoughts of previous or contemporary authors to percolate in their minds and to influence their own writing. Christine de Pisan wrote *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) in answer to *Le Roman de la Rose* (ca.1270-1280), in which two male writers attack the dignity of women.⁹ Chaucer borrowed some of his tales from Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1351).¹⁰ Dickens' character Sidney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) was inspired by a character he played in

⁷ Slater, Michael. "Dickens, Charles John Huffam (1812-1870)." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Retrieved 16 June 2010 from OxfordDNB.com.

⁸ Maixner, Paul, ed. Robert Louis Stevenson: the Critical Heritage. London: Routledge, 1996.

⁹ Tuchman, Barbara W. *A Distant Mirror: the Calamitous 14th Century*. New York: Knopf, 1978.

¹⁰ Weir, 2009.

Wilkie Collins' play, *The Frozen Deep* (1857).¹¹ Christina Rossetti's poem "Goblin Market" (1862) influenced Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Some of Lewis Carroll's writing influenced Rossetti in turn.¹² The influence of reading on an author's writing isn't always traceable, but when it is, it provides exciting illumination into the author's mind.

And so it is a cycle, from writer, to reader, to writer again. It all contributes to an always evolving illumination of the mind.

¹¹ Yarrington, Alison; Everest, Kelvin. *Reflections of Revolution: Images of Romanticism*. London: Routledge, 1993.

¹² "Rossetti, Christina Georgina, 1830-1894." *Literature Online Biography*. Retrieved 17 March 2010 from Lion.Chadwyck.com.