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## Who's Afraid of Content-Driven Criticism?

### An Introduction to Erica Jong for the Brave

We might want to reconsider our formalist critical attitudes to literature along the lines suggested by the question immortalised by Stanley Fish: "Is there a text in this class?"<sup>1</sup> Rather than staying with the notion of interpretive communities, however, I would like to use the question as a wake-up call to redirect attention from theory to text, and allow ourselves to ask another important question: "Is this text about anything?" We may find out, as a reward for our infinite courage, that for a text to be "seriously, even passionately, about some thing," as the eminent postmodernist novelist and author of fictional autobiographies John Barth insisted the case should be,<sup>2</sup> is not, after all, mutually exclusive with the text being poetically created, verbally spectacular, or structurally impeccable; we may indeed conclude that for a text to be about something will not necessarily diminish the pleasures of the text.

Why would it preclude any pleasure indeed, one might wonder. The answer leads into the heart of academic debates about the literary canon and the power struggles conducted around inclusion and exclusion of student bodies, bodies of texts, and members of staff. There are losses to suffer and privileges to gain, all hanging in the balance. The dangers of having to sit through defences of dissertations where one never even heard of the authors' names, let alone read the works discussed, will have to be pitched against the freedom to study what one is

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1 Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).

2 John Barth, *Chimera* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Crest, 1973), p. 36.

interested in; the fear of having to see wonderful works of literature one has practically grown up with pushed to the margin of interest will have to be weighed against the sense of discovery that literature can mean a body of texts relevant to the lives and respective backgrounds of the researchers in quite direct ways; the concern that the world and academia will go to the dogs if we step on this unstable ground of shifting values will have to be measured against the faith that critical guidance can be offered on any number of different literatures with equal thoroughness, virtuosity and erudition. A new syllabus may lead to a new department and to a loss of interest in an old subject. English literature may follow in the footsteps of Latin and Ancient Greek literatures – they offered the tools and approaches to use on the literatures springing up at the fringes of the old cultures. This time the language may be set forever, but the content will vary drastically.

Content, however, is such a critical minefield. How can we avoid taking content personally? How can we avoid making assumptions? And this is precisely the core of contention. Literature was invented to be taken personally; and we all make, and have, assumptions. For the purposes of claiming objectivity and scholarly approaches in literary criticism, if that is indeed our goal, it is infinitely easier to limit ourselves to quantifiable and measurable aspects on the one hand and theoretical ones on the other. It is significantly less complicated to have a cool critical discussion upon the form than the content of most literary works. It is considerably less controversial to discuss critical strategies in the abstract sense than to enter the realm of messy humanness and discover that so far ignored methods of presentation, selection of material and use of language have their own rules, their own histories and their own contexts. If we do not agree, it is reassuring to fall back upon well-established critical sources to quote and final authorities to appeal to, rather than having to immerse oneself in the quicksand of recently published doctoral dissertations pertaining to the subject that now seems impossible to ignore. It is easier to apply regulations of the kind orchestras and conductors have known for ages, with just two cornerstones, where rule number one is “The Conductor is Always Right” while rule number two states “If the Conductor is not Right, Rule number one applies automatically.” It is easier to claim that one canon is enough for all of us than to accept the notion of multiple universes with their own specific canons whirling around one another and fading in and out of perception.

But enough already – it is time to bring a text into this discussion. The choice I offer is Erica Jong’s most recent work, *What Do Women Want? Bread,*

*Roses, Sex, Power* (1998),<sup>3</sup> a volume of essays that represents Jong's entire oeuvre by touching upon themes and topics which are central to her interest and which have been also explored in her earlier works. The name of Erica Jong will no doubt serve as a reminder to discussions of content-driven criticism. Whether or not one read any of her works, there is a vaguely unpleasant ring to her name, conjuring up images of mass media presence, best-seller lists, controversial subject matter and possibly foul language. For Hungarian readers not even that much – whereas her most spectacularly successful book, *Fear of Flying* (1973)<sup>4</sup> was finally translated in 1990,<sup>5</sup> we seem to have lost interest once that was done. Not entirely surprisingly. In order for her books to be appreciated in Hungary the translator(s) would have to create an entire lexical field in mainstream Hungarian that would cover sexuality, especially, but not limited to, women's sexuality, with a range and scope quite unheard of and, so far, quite unvoiced in polite company.<sup>6</sup>

What, shall we discuss such topics, written in foul language, as part of an academic exercise? Well, that is precisely the question. The intrepid critic who actually goes and reads Erica Jong's works is in for a surprise. Jong's language, for one, is invariably rich and evocative. Jong in fact started as a poet, and a prize-winning one at that, and still considers poetry as the saving grace of humankind:

People think they can do without poetry. And they can. At least until they fall in love, lose a friend, lose a child or a parent, or lose their way in the dark woods of life. People think they can live without poetry. And they can. At least until they become fatally ill, have a baby, or fall desperately, madly in love. [...] Poetry is the language we speak in times of greatest need. And the fact that it is an endangered species in our culture tells us that we are in deep trouble. [...] The skin, not the soul, has all our care – despite lip service to the contrary. And many of us are dying for want of care for the soul. The poet is the caretaker of the soul; in many civilizations, the poet's contribution is central.<sup>7</sup>

3 Erica Jong, *What Do Women Want? Bread, Roses, Sex, Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998).

4 Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973).

5 Erica Jong, *Félek a repüléstől*, Hung. trans. András Gáspár, poetry trans. Péter Szentmihályi Szabó ([Budapest]: Fabula, 1990).

6 A new development since the time this paper was written has been the publication of a new Hungarian translation of *Fear of Flying*: Erica Jong, *Rettegés a repüléstől*, Hung. trans. Anna Pavlov (Budapest: Tericum, 2002). Tericum plans to publish the entire oeuvre of Jong in Hungarian.

7 Erica Jong, "Yeats's Glade and Bashō's Bee: The Impossibility of Doing Without Poetry," *What Do Women Want?*, pp. 189–190.

Jong also considers poetry her personal haven:

When I am most perplexed, I return to my roots: poetry. I consider myself a poet who supports her poetry habit with novels and nonfiction. I know I am lucky to have supported myself as a poet for twenty-five years without ever writing a book I did not believe in. The novel is more elastic than the poem. It allows for social satire, cooking, toothbrushes, the way we live now. Poetry, on the contrary, boils things down to essences.<sup>8</sup>

Fanny, the heroine of Jong's pseudo-18th-century comic novel, who combines ambition as an author with beauty and a whole series of adventures in the various fields of highway robbery, prostitution, motherhood and piracy, is similarly enthusiastic when she is about to write her first great Philosophical Poem:

And what was Poetry but a rhyming Means of leading the Human Race towards Perfection? And what was the Poet but a Human Creature inspir'd to raise his Fellow Creatures closer towards the Divine Spirit?

Hot with the Fire of the Muse, I sat down to write – but, alas, I had neither Quill nor Ink!<sup>9</sup>

But will her poetic language validate Jong's writing? She is one of those postmodernist verbalists who cherish the power of language, who enjoy the sounds, the rhythm, the imagery, who revel in the sheer pleasure of words, words, words. In true postmodernist fashion, Jong's words occasionally get arranged in lists. So far, all is well. These lists, however, may turn out to consist of more than fifty words and expressions for a prostitute<sup>10</sup> or similarly lengthy lexical explorations of female and male sexual organs.<sup>11</sup> Are we still to applaud her skill as a writer or shall we now shrink from her topics? Life was so much nicer in the 19th century. One could just blame an author for committing "the highest moral offence a novel writer can commit" and add one's choice of sin to replace Elizabeth Rigby's, who chose to chastise Currer Bell upon the publication of *Jane Eyre* of the highest moral offence "of making an unworthy character interesting in

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8 Erica Jong, "Writing for Love," *What Do Women Want?*, p. 178.

9 Erica Jong, *Fanny: being The True History of the Adventures of Fanny Hackabout-Jones* (Scarborough, Ontario: Signet, 1981), pp. 107–108.

10 Erica Jong, "Introduction," *Fanny*, p. 6.

11 As a starting point, may I suggest *Parachutes & Kisses* (New York: New American Library, 1984), or, to risk stating the obvious, *Fear of Flying*.

the eyes of a reader.”<sup>12</sup> This is the type of criticism those engaged in the study of literature were hoping to avoid by placing the emphasis on form. But there is a chance that we managed to throw out the baby with the bath water, or, at least, to offer a double edged sword to those who wish to defend the study of literature in the name of objectified scholarly approaches and find public interest waning in their work: we remove our combined critical hands from the pulse of living literature at our peril. And living literature is often *about* something.

Yet Jong writes about so many things that have not been considered the proper study of literature – including sex, bringing upon her head the wrath of those who are always on the alert against pornography. But wait, sex has become an acceptable topic for generations of authors. Brothels were fine, as long as men wrote about them, and so were women in love. Indeed, the gory was, at various periods in literature, daring, new, and revolutionary. Moreover, it was held against women authors that they did not descend into the bloody, the political, or other dark regions beneath womanish propriety, thereby rendering themselves limited and boring. Jong recalls an incident from her college days to demonstrate the “damned if they do, damned if they don’t” situation women writers find themselves in:

[A] distinguished critic came to my creative writing class and delivered himself of this thundering judgement: ‘Women can’t be writers. They don’t know blood and guts, and puking in the streets, and fucking whores, and swaggering through Pigalle at five A.M.’ [...] It’s ironic that the critic – the late Anatole Broyard – should have identified ‘blood and guts’ as the quality that women writers supposedly lacked, since clearly women are the sex most in tune with the entrails of life. But we can better understand the critic’s condemnation if we remember that in the nineteenth century, women writers were denigrated for their delicacy, their excessive propriety (which supposedly precluded greatness), while in the past couple of decades they have been condemned by male critics for their impropriety – which also supposedly precludes greatness. Whatever women do or don’t do precludes greatness, in the mind of the chauvinist. We must see this sort of reasoning for what it is: prejudice.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Rigby in *Quarterly Review*, 1848, quoted in Erica Jong, “Jane Eyre’s Unbroken Will,” *What Do Women Want?*, p. 49.

<sup>13</sup> Erica Jong, “Blood and Guts: A Woman Writer in the Late Twentieth Century,” *What Do Women Want?*, pp. 41–43.

Oh, but there is more. Not only does Jong write about sex; she also writes about women as humans with ambitions as persons, as lovers, as professionals, as mothers, as friends and as spiritual beings. Perhaps it really would be wiser just to ignore her. How are we ever to categorise books based on these topics? At least *Fanny* and *Serenissima: A Novel of Venice* (1987), which was later renamed as *Shylock's Daughter* ("it never occurred to me anyone might *not* know that the *Serenissima* is simply another name for Venice," explains the author)<sup>14</sup> are safely within the realm of historical fiction: Fanny is placed within the conventions of 18th-century English novels, while Jessica in *Serenissima* or *Shylock's Daughter* goes back to 16th-century Venice and falls in love with Shakespeare himself. Jong's volumes of poetry will also surely be forgiven; poetry is a Good Thing in the world of literary criticism, and anyone who insists on writing poetry should be praised rather than scorned. Besides, we can always call her a Woman Poet and thus put her in her Proper Place, once we realise what those poems are about.<sup>15</sup>

But those works of fiction and non-fiction are truly a problem. This is partly a formal question, and as such would be safe for any critical scrutiny: it is a worthy ambition to examine how fictional Jong's works of autobiography are on the one hand, and how autobiographical her fiction is on the other. The answer is, on both counts: very much so. This in itself is not a particularly surprising answer; if one looks at another American postmodernist novelist, John Barth, who also wrote a pseudo-18th-century novel, *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960, 1967), one could trace how autobiographical elements increased in his oeuvre until his fiction reached the level of saturation best described as autobiographical fiction, see for example his *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1991), only to be followed by a book of fictional autobiography in *Once Upon a Time* (1994).<sup>16</sup>

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14 Erica Jong, "Introduction" *Shylock's Daughter: A Novel of Love in Venice* (New York: HarperCollins, 1987, 1995), p. 14.

15 Erica Jong, *Fruits & Vegetables* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971, 1997), *Half-Lives* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), *Loveroot* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975), *At the Edge of the Body* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), *Ordinary Miracles* (New York, New American Library, 1983), *Becoming Light: New and Selected* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

16 John Barth, *The Sot-Weed Factor* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960, 1967), *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (Boston, New York: Little, Brown and Co, 1991), *Once Upon a Time* (Boston, New York: Little, Brown and Co, 1994). For more details see Judit Friedrich, "Recycling Literature: Myth, Postmodernism, and John Barth's Later Fiction" (Kandidátusi értekezés [Ph.D. Dissertation] Budapest, 1994), pp. 148–153.

Erica Jong's models and inspirations, Anaïs Nin and Henry Miller, whose example guided her in her exploration of being a woman writer and of writing freely about sex, also provided examples of working around the artificial division between fiction and life. Writing about Henry Miller, Jong voices her own position as well:

His contradictions were many. Victorian and bohemian, *schmorrer* and benefactor, sexual guru and tireless romantic, he made women up out of pen and ink (and often watercolor). Did he make up his autobiographies too? In a way, he did. In a way, we *all* make up our autobiographies.<sup>17</sup>

Jong also examines Anaïs Nin's first two volumes of journals, which were finally published unexpurgated, in accordance with Nin's wishes, only posthumously. Jong finds in Nin not only a perfect example of what women authors have to overcome in order to become and survive as authors but also, again, the question of the borderlines between fiction and autobiography:

If Nin was such a pivotal and important figure in the history of modern literature, why has she been so maligned?

The first reason is obvious: sexism. The second is also obvious: our unique cultural fear of sexuality. The third reason is equally obvious: What she has created is new (a kind of writing that hybridizes autobiography and fiction). [...]

There are signs that as this century ends, her innovations have become part of our literature. The incest taboo has been broken. Autobiography and fiction have been merged into one form. Women writers have a degree of freedom undreamed of by her generation. And the unexpurgated journals will keep on coming. They will continue to be attacked by women who are afraid of freedom and by men who like women that way. But for our daughters and granddaughters they will be there.<sup>18</sup>

As for herself, having produced four volumes of the Isadora Wing stories,<sup>19</sup> a series that was generally perceived as thinly disguised autobiography, and two volumes of memoirs<sup>20</sup> to add to her two works of historical fiction that clearly

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17 Erica Jong, "Good-bye to Henry-San," *What Do Women Want?*, p. 119.

18 Erica Jong, "Incest and Anaïs Nin," *What Do Women Want?*, pp. 112-113.

19 Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying* (1973), *How to Save Your Own Life* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), *Parachutes & Kisses* (1984), *Any Woman's Blues* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).

20 Erica Jong, *The Devil at Large: Erica Jong on Henry Miller* (New York, Random House, 1993), *Fear of Fifty* (New York, HarperCollins, 1994).

represent some of her deepest concerns from motherhood to being an artist, Jong is ready to sum up her own views:

I think I've begun to understand how the process of making fiction differs from that of making memoir. A memoir is tethered to one's own experience in a particularly limiting way: The observing consciousness of the book is rooted in a historical person. That historical person may be rich and subtle, but he or she can never be as subtle as the interplay among various characters who all grow out of aspects of the author. In the memoir, the 'I' dominates. In the novel, the 'I' is made up of many characters' 'I's. More richness is possible, more points of view, deeper imitation of life.

When I finished *Fear of Fifty*, I felt I had quite exhausted my own life and might never write another book. What I eventually discovered was that I was liberated rather than exhausted. Having shed my own autobiography, I now felt ready to invent in a new way. [...]

A character who is not oneself may even access some deep memory in the brain that seemed lost forever. Fictional characters excavate real memories. Flaubert, after all, claimed to be Emma Bovary, gave her his restlessness and discontent. In some ways an author may be freer to expose himself in a character unlike himself. There is liberty in wearing a mask. The mask may become the condition for speaking the truth.<sup>21</sup>

After all this hope in approaching Jong through her genre, we are back again at the problem. The sorry scoundrel of a writer actually wants to speak the truth. How are we ever going to get away from content? She may even think it is a compliment if people cannot remember all her authorial strategies because they were so riveted by what she wrote about. Sadly, there were entire cultural periods when artists were not supposed to foreground their technique; the text was supposed to flow effortlessly and elegantly. How retro of Jong not to break under the lack of critical appreciation; she has only herself to blame if she chose to bask in the light of readerly love.

Shall we face what she writes about, then? Be brave, Reader! Jong writes about being pregnant, about birth, about being a young mother, about the tremendous guilt involved in trying to balance her roles as a mother, a lover and a writer, about the difficulties of earning one's living as an artist, about being a woman artist at that, about having lovers, about growing older, about having dreams, about having nightmares. She has also published a work of non-fiction

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21 Jong, "Writing for Love," *What Do Women Want?*, pp. 178–180.



about witches<sup>22</sup> and some words of fictional advice for children and parents on divorce.<sup>23</sup> Her writing is not only sexy, it is also funny and wise, irreverent and free, uninhibited and poetic. And it is, passionately, about what it is like being a woman who is neither angel nor devil but, as Fanny says, “is made of Sweets and Bitters,” is “both Reason and Rump,”<sup>24</sup> is a complex human being. Jong writes about all of this in all of her books, historical, autobiographical and fictional. She explores as many facets of the condition of being the female of the species as possible. She seems to think this matters. Millions of her readers seem to agree. Should we study her writing? As you wish. Should we read her? By all means.

What do women want? Do we care? Not very likely. And we care even less about who Erica Jong is or what she says. Academically speaking, that is. Otherwise we might. And here is the bone of contention. If we are ready to leave behind the postmodernist conviction that highbrow and lowbrow are artificial distinctions within the arts, even the verbal kind, driven by the struggle for power among publishers, academics, the media, and critics of all sorts, we will argue ourselves into complete separation with not only the public at large but, specifically, with our students. Do we really want to retire into a corner where nobody will want to follow us, let alone listen? Do we really want to give literal or figurative wall-lectures, in the time-honoured tradition of the 1660s, when candidates for a degree “were required to give six lectures on natural philosophy, called *wall* lectures because, as a rule, only the four walls were there to hear”?<sup>25</sup> We could. All we need to do is maintain traditions, make sure that we do not venture on uncertain grounds, we do not explore territories that have not been mapped. Let us all just talk about the weather. Nice day, isn't it?

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22 Erica Jong, *Witches* (New York: Abrams, 1981, 1997, 1999).

23 Erica Jong, *Megan's Book of Divorce: A Kid's Book for Adults* (New York: New American Library, 1984); *Megan's Two Houses: A Story of Adjustment* (Los Angeles: NewStar Media, 1996).

24 Jong, *Fanny*, p. 187.

25 Morris Marples's *University Slang* (1950), quoted in Jeffrey Kacirk, *Forgotten English: A 365-Day Calendar of Vanishing Vocabulary and Folklore for 2002* (Pomegranate, 2002) 18 April.