
Reviewed by Jeanne Armstrong

Feminist Writing from Ancient Times to the Modern World is an anthology of 203 documents authored over the past four millennia primarily by women writing from a broad range of “feminist” perspectives. Editor Tiffany K. Wayne is an independent scholar formerly affiliated with the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at Stanford and has published works on Transcendentalism and women in Transcendentalism. The anthology is a reasonably comprehensive, global collection of documents concerning women’s roles, rights and issues, which are arranged in chronological order beginning with poems from ancient Sumer, circa 2350 BCE, by Enheduanna, and culminating with the Association of Women for Action and Research, 2009 in Singapore.

By sharing the texts written over four millennia and from many regions of the world, Wayne intends the anthology to especially serve as a recovery of “women’s voices, agency and resistance . . . [and] to open up discussions about feminisms many histories” (xliv). While the majority of documents are by authors from the United States and Western Europe, the anthology includes authors from Sub-Saharan Africa; East Asia; Western and Northern Europe; Eastern Europe and Russia; Latin American and the Caribbean; Middle East and North Africa; North America; Southeast Asia and India; and United Nations/International. The documents selected for the anthology do not include fiction but there is some academic theory as well as poetry, autobiography, political, historical, social or cultural essays and proclamations.
This anthology has more than 100 contributors from around the world, but especially from the United States and Western Europe, who are scholars engaged in varied areas of feminist scholarship. The scholars, who analyze and interpret these 203 documents, are “historians, sociologists, literary and cultural theorists, religious scholars, writers and activists” (xlv).

In her introduction, Wayne identifies feminism, or “féminisme,” as a term first used in France in the 1890s although debates about women’s rights and roles reach back to the 15th century. She explains the anthology’s usage of feminism as a “consciousness that informs a variety of rights movements, social justice efforts and individual awakenings around the world throughout time” and which recognizes that not all women are powerless in patriarchies although “all cultures are patriarchal” (xlii). Wayne argues that feminism can’t be dismissed as simply western and bourgeois because it appears in different forms in various “specific historical and national contexts” (xlii).

Tiffany Wayne does not pretend to take a neutral or objective stance on the significance of feminism as a solution to women’s ongoing oppression and makes a strong statement about the ongoing issues and problems faced by women worldwide:

   No nation or culture is exempt from violence against women and rape; many women . . . lack access to affordable and accessible birth control and reproductive information, girls are systematically denied education; in other areas and traditions, women are prevented from leaving the house or engaging in paid work; in the most repressive situations, women and girls are maimed or killed for religious and social transgressions (xlii).

As mentioned, the documents are arranged in chronological order, which seems appropriate since this clusters together documents from specific historical feminist and civil rights movements,
such as the suffrage movement or the French revolutionary period. Each entry has a biographical note; the document or text; analysis of the text; critical response; and impact and legacy, followed by a “suggested reading” list. One of the 100 plus expert contributors provides the analysis, critical response, legacy and reading list sections for the entries.

Examples of entries include poetry by Sappho (600 BCE), Yeshe Tsogyal (Tibetan Buddhist C. 800) and Sor Juana de la Cruz (1692 Mexico); three documents by women involved in the French Revolution; Margaret Sanger’s “The Case for Birth Control, 1924; and an excerpt from the 2005 book on female genital mutilation in Europe by Waris Dirie, a model who was originally from Somalia.

For the Margaret Sanger entry, the biographical section explains her fight for access to contraception in the United States: founding the American Birth Control League, later Planned Parenthood; and opening the first “physician-staffed birth control clinic.” (478). The analysis section explains how Sanger shifted from her original socialist emphasis on birth control for the working class to an emphasis on how birth control could benefit all social classes.

The critical response section discusses criticism of Sanger initially by physicians, which later decreased when she partnered with people in the medical profession; criticism by intellectuals that the “white race” would be “outnumbered by minority races”; and the Roman Catholic attack against birth control on moral grounds. In the “impact and legacy” section, commentator Christy Jo Snider describes the role Sanger had in changing birth control from an “illegal and unrecognized medical issue to becoming a standard component of health care services” and in establishing Planned Parenthood as an ongoing advocate for and provider of access to birth control (481).
In addition to the chronological entries, *Feminist Writing from Ancient Times to the Modern World* has an index; a list of entries by region; a topic finder; and a comprehensive bibliography. The topic finder is organized into several broad topics: education and writing; human rights; marriage and motherhood; political and legal rights; race and racism; religion and spirituality; sexuality; and work and economics. Background information on the editor and the contributors is also provided.

This resource is useful for students at the high school and university level as well as for those served by public libraries, especially if the user needs to identify feminist texts on certain topics; from a specific country or region; or created in a particular era/century. The supplementary information interprets the feminist texts and discusses reception and legacy of the text, which should be helpful for students in deciding the significance of a specific text within the broad context of feminism in certain periods or countries. Despite some limitations on what could be included in an anthology which attempts to be so globally comprehensive, this anthology should be acquired by most libraries from public to academic since it has unique coverage of feminist narratives created over four millennia and from around the world.

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