

Post-War British Women Writers and their Cultural Impact: A Quantitative Approach

Ingo Berensmeyer and Sonja Trurnit

Ingo Berensmeyer, Sonja Trurnit, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich

Peer-Reviewer: Katherine Bode, Joshua Kotin

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ABSTRACT

This article uses a quantitative approach to study the reception of women writers in post-war Britain. Using data from two influential journals in the period (1946–1960), the *TLS* and the *Listener*, we first establish a list of those contemporary British women writers who were most frequently mentioned in these magazines. We then compare their representation in the magazines to that of three comparison groups: a selection of British male contemporary writers, well-known earlier British women writers, and canonical male authors. We explore how the differential categories of gender and canonicity intersect in the (under-) representation of contemporary women writers, and how this underrepresentation not only holds true for the mid-twentieth century but, at least as it is reflected in the attention paid to writers by *TLS* reviewers, continues in the later 20th and early 21st century

Introduction

This article presents a large-scale data analysis of the cultural presence of women writers in post-war Britain.¹ Its principal objective is to assess the cultural impact of women authors in this period. Our approach measures this impact in relation to the wider literary field, including a comparison with male contemporary authors, canonical authors both male and female, and a selection from the subsequent generation of women writers who emerge in the 1960s.

Feminist literary criticism has long paid attention to the representation of women in fiction, to changing plot patterns or different types of female characters.² But there

has not been much sustained research into the quantitative representation of women writers in literary periodicals, or the press more generally, compared to their male colleagues. Such research has only become possible in the last few decades due to the availability of databases and new technologies of data mining, visualizing, and modelling that enable “distant reading” or “reading by numbers.”³ These technologies provide the tools to measure with some precision, based on empirical data, the degree of underrepresentation and disadvantage of women authors in the literary field.

As an earlier quantitative study of English-language fiction has shown, the proportion of women writers producing novels was reduced by half between 1850 and 1950, a decline found not only in ‘high-culture’ books preserved in academic libraries, but also in the number of bestsellers written by women (sharply falling between 1930 and 1970).⁴ This has been explained by broad socio-cultural changes: the rising acceptability for men of being a professional novelist and for women to take up other professions, and the subsequent ‘edging out’ of women from the literary marketplace.⁵ As Underwood et al. (2018) have demonstrated, women in this period before the 1970s and the rise of second-wave feminism are not only underrepresented as authors but also as characters in fiction, even in books written by women.

For our more local study, we have chosen the immediate post-war period in Britain up to 1960, a time that has been called the “nadir of British feminism”,⁶ mainly because of a widespread return to traditional gender roles after World War II. In English literature, more particularly, this period is known for its “angry young men” in fiction and drama and the (mostly male) Movement in poetry. An ongoing process of canon revision has helped to redress the balance by bolstering the reputations of post-war British women writers such as Barbara Pym, Mary Renault, and Elizabeth Taylor. Yet, so far, there has been little systematic research into contemporary mechanisms of recognition and canon formation.⁷

Our study focuses on British literary life in the post-war period up to 1960, not in terms of the quantity of publications but in looking at how often contemporary women writers of the 1940s and 1950s are mentioned in reviews and other editorial content in two leading literary and cultural magazines of the time, the *Times Literary*

Supplement (TLS) and the *Listener*. These journals offer a glimpse of how reviewers (both male and female) saw (or constructed) the literary field of their own time, and how they sized up and established literary reputations by invoking the names of canonical authors as standards of comparison. We stop in 1960 before the advent of the boom in fiction by a new generation of women writers such as Angela Carter, Margaret Drabble, and A. S. Byatt.

Our results give an indication of how ‘masculine’ book reviewing was in Britain from the mid-1940s to the late 1950s. We found that only few contemporary women writers are mentioned with any frequency or regularity in these pages, compared to a selection of their male contemporaries. Those women who are frequently mentioned and can thus be regarded as the leading female authors of their time are mentioned much less often than the men with whom they compete for the attention of reviewers and the reading public.

The results of our study will not come as a surprise. We found that a dead male author was far more likely to be mentioned by name than a living male author. Men were more likely to be named than women, canonical or contemporary. As an additional result, we now know who the dominant women writers were, in terms of mentions by name, in the *TLS* and the *Listener*, two representative magazines with different but overlapping target audiences – a venerable ‘highbrow’ institution and a more ‘middlebrow’ publication. These results are also instructive for thinking about literary generations; our ‘top twenty’ lists do not contain the authors one would now associate with the post-war period (perhaps Muriel Spark or Iris Murdoch would spring to mind) but authors who had established their reputation during the interwar years: at the top are Rose Macaulay, born in 1881; Elizabeth Bowen, born in 1899; and Edith Sitwell, born in 1887. The oldest writer in the lists below is the actor and screenwriter Mabel Constanduros (1880); the only one born after 1920 is the poet Elizabeth Jennings (1926).

Establishing the data

Embarking on this study, we first collected and documented as many women writers from this period as possible. With the help of a small team, we were able to compile

a list of women writers who were active in the period 1945–1960. The only criterion for inclusion was whether they had been published in book form during this time; we included British, but in a few cases also Anglo-Irish writers (Elizabeth Bowen) or Americans who were active in Britain (Sylvia Plath). When in doubt, we favoured inclusion to get the widest possible view of the literary field in Britain at this time. We did not exclude any genre, so that ‘literary activity’ includes children’s books, travel books, scholarly publications, etc. This was more difficult and laborious than expected, and the work has not yet been fully concluded. It is probably impossible to establish a complete list, but the preliminary dataset used for this article now comprises 1100 women authors.⁸ These have been checked for pseudonyms and other potential sources of confusion; quite a few women writers published under one or more assumed names. In at least one case there are two writers ‘hiding’ behind the same name, Hazel Adair. In establishing the data, the aim was to count persons, not names, so there are two Hazel Adairs, but authors publishing under several pseudonyms are counted as one. We are confident that the basis for this study is a representative selection of British women writers active during this period.⁹

Next to sales figures, which are rather difficult to come by for this period, literary prizes are an indicator of writers’ critical and popular presence. In a survey of sixteen British literary awards between 1945 and 1960, totalling 191 prize-giving events, we found that 49 were awarded to women and 142 to men; 25.6 % or just over a quarter of the winners were women.¹⁰ A more detailed analysis of women’s literary reputation and their impact on the culture at large is possible by examining contemporary book reviews. For this purpose, two databases are particularly useful: the *TLS Historical Archive*, which presents a searchable full-text database of the *Times Literary Supplement*, the leading British literary journal, covering almost the entire 20th century and the first decade of the 21st; and the *Listener Historical Archive*, which presents a searchable full-text database of the BBC’s own magazine, including regular book reviews, from 1929 to 1991. The thematic scope of the *Listener* is obviously wider than that of the *TLS*, as will have been its readership, with the advantage of giving a better sense of an author’s presence in the culture at large, especially radio and television, as well as their popularity. We believe that the combination of the *TLS* and the *Listener* data present a useful coverage of critical reputation and popular appeal that may tell us more than awards and sales figures alone. In order to be able to work with regular five-year spans, the temporal scope

of the project was narrowed down to 1946–60, thus yielding three five-year spans (1946–50, 1951–55, 1956–60).

While the set of women writers is as complete as currently possible, the comparison groups are based on educated guesses. Relying on information from literary histories and surveys of British literary life, we compiled three sample groups: twenty male writers active in the same period (T. S. Eliot, Kingsley Amis, etc.), a sample of earlier canonical women writers (Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf etc.), and a list of male writers that form the traditional “core canon” or “hypercanon” of literature in English (Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens etc.).¹¹

The fact that two fifths of the women writers active in the period are never noticed in the *TLS*, while less than a third of them are mentioned in the *Listener*, confirms the general impression that many authors never receive any notice at all, even in specialized journals. Considering that some categories of publications do not usually receive reviews in the *TLS*, a review rate of 62 % of the total number of active women writers is not at all a bad figure. However, what Franco Moretti memorably called “the slaughterhouse of literature”¹² really begins when we look at the relative frequency with which those writers who do appear in the databases are mentioned, in relation to other groups of writers.

For the *TLS*, the database allows us to include only editorial content (reviews, editorials, poems etc.) and exclude advertising (mostly ads placed by publishers, but also, e.g., the “School of Authorship” in Gloucester Place, London NW1, which regularly advertised in the Notices section, offering courses by Enid Blyton, Pamela Hansford Johnson, and other writers who are thus frequently mentioned, but occur with considerably less frequency in the journal’s review section). Concerning the *Listener*, where publishers’ ads are less frequent, we argued that a writer’s standing in the wider culture is enhanced if and when he or she appears in such content, so for this corpus we chose to include the complete text of the archive, while excluding advertising content in the *TLS* archive. As the search functions of these databases do not include gender as a category, it was not feasible to limit searches to texts written by men or women, or to books under review by men or women. We counted the frequency of names mentioned in these pages, not making a distinction between authors as reviewers or authors whose books were being reviewed, or authors mentioned in passing. We believe that these numbers, independent of the exact

context in which they appear, reveal something about the authors' relative standing in the field, their cultural presence, prestige, or impact. Care was taken, in mining the data, to account for pseudonyms and other potential contaminations – such as mistaking the writer Elizabeth Taylor for the film star of the same name, or confusing the writer Heather Cornish with an article about Cornish heather.

Literature is not a race, and authors are not racehorses who compete against each other. But racehorses have been named after famous authors, and these had to be excluded as well. Possibly, in the future, machine learning and artificial intelligence will be smart enough to tell authors from horses. For this study, we still counted and checked each reference manually. Quite a few errors will have passed us by, but we are confident that we have established a reliable empirical basis, as reflected in the *Listener* and *TLS* data, for a quantitative gender-critical study of the literary field of post-war Britain.

The top twenty and their peers, 1946–60

In the *Listener*, 329 contemporary British women writers are mentioned 1758 times over the period from 1946 to 1960. Statistically, every author could thus be named five times, but this is of course not to be expected. The top twenty most frequently mentioned writers occur 684 times, which means that only 6.1 % of the women included in this sample receive 38.9 % of the mentions in this group, and only 1.8 % of the women writers included in our total list of 1100. The top five receive almost half of all mentions among the top group (46.2 %) and almost a fifth of the total (18 %).

In the *TLS*, the overall distribution is less extreme. The total number of mentions is 4797. Out of 682 women writers mentioned, the top twenty are mentioned 886 times, meaning that 2.9 % of the women in this sample receive almost a fifth (18.5 %) of the mentions (of contemporary women writers). With 343 mentions, the top five receive 38.7 % of the top twenty, or 7.2 % of the total mentions.

Table 1 presents an overview of the top twenty in both journals for the period under discussion, with the number of times their name appears in each.

<i>Listener</i>		<i>TLS</i>	
Rose Macaulay	87	Edith Sitwell	102
Edith Sitwell	72	Elizabeth Bowen	84
Elizabeth Bowen	68	Dorothy Sayers	59
Kathleen Raine	46	Rose Macaulay	51
Honor Tracy	43	Kathleen Raine	47
Rebecca West	36	Storm Jameson	45
Elizabeth Jennings	34	Agatha Christie	42
Frances Bellerby	32	Freya Stark	41
Dorothy Sayers	32	Antonia White	41
Mabel Constanduros	25	Alison Uttley	38
P. Hansford Johnson	23	Kathleen Freeman	37
Rosamond Lehmann	23	P. Hansford Johnson	37
Ivy Compton-Burnett	22	Noel Streatfeild	37
Margaret Lane	22	Elizabeth Jennings	35
Dilys Powell	22	Rebecca West	35
Phyllis Bentley	20	Jacquetta Hawkes	32
Nancy Mitford	20	Muriel Spark	32
Yvonne Mitchell	20	Eleanor Farjeon	31
Jacquetta Hawkes	19	Angela Thirkell	31
Freya Stark ¹³	18	Anne Ridler	29
Total	684		886

Table 1. Top twenty post-war British women writers in the *Listener* and the *TLS* 1946–60.

There are several striking aspects to note about these two top twenty lists. First of all, only ten names feature in both lists. But there appears to be unanimous agreement about the top: Bowen, Macaulay, Raine, and Sitwell are in the top five of both lists, if in different positions.¹⁴ In terms of genres, the lists present a mixture of (predominantly) novelists but also a number of poets (Bellerby, Jennings, Raine, Sitwell), writers of detective fiction (Christie, Sayers), children’s books (Farjeon, Streatfeild), biographies (Lane) and other nonfiction (Hawkes, Powell, Stark). For modern readers, the lists might be even more interesting for the authors they do not

contain: Iris Murdoch, for example, is mentioned a mere 15 times in the *Listener* and 17 times in the *TLS*; Muriel Spark is mentioned a mere 14 times in the *Listener*. One might be surprised to see a critically appreciated novelist like Ivy Compton-Burnett languishing at a mere 22 mentions in the *Listener* and 24 in the *TLS*.

Combining these data, we can compile our own top twenty:

Edith Sitwell	174
Elizabeth Bowen	152
Rose Macaulay	138
Rebecca West	116
Kathleen Raine	93
Dorothy Sayers	91
Elizabeth Jennings	69
Pamela Hansford Johnson	60
Freya Stark	59
Agatha Christie	55
Honor Tracy	55
Storm Jameson	54
Jacquetta Hawkes	51
Antonia White	51
Nancy Mitford	48
Phyllis Bentley	47
Ivy Compton-Burnett	46
Muriel Spark	46
Rosamond Lehmann	45
Kathleen Freeman	43

Table 2. Top twenty post-war British women writers 1946–60 in *Listener* and *TLS* combined.

Just below this list are Iris Murdoch (38), Alison Uttley (38), and Noel Streatfeild (37).

Next, we want to find out how these women writers perform in relation to their male colleagues during the same period. For the latter, there is no complete or even near-

complete list. In the absence of a gender-sensitive search function that would allow us to find all the men or all the women mentioned in the corpus, one can in this case only work with a set of educated guesses. Relying on frequently mentioned names in literary histories and scholarly work on the period and its literary life, we assembled a comparison group of twenty male post-war British writers. In doing so, we aimed for a mixture of highly canonical figures like T. S. Eliot, Evelyn Waugh, Kingsley Amis, and George Orwell with now less well-known but at the time quite successful writers like Norman Collins and P. H. Newby, as well as the poet Philip Larkin, the dramatist John Osborne, and the non-fiction writer Paul Brickhill, author of the bestseller *The Dam Busters*, 1951, which became the first million-selling British paperback in 1956.¹⁵

While these are not exactly the top twenty male authors as compared to the top twenty women writers, one might expect the sample group to perform less well, overall, than the women’s top twenty. However, this is not the case. Let us look at the number of mentions for this group in both journals in this period:

<i>Listener</i>		<i>TLS</i>	
T. S. Eliot	311	T. S. Eliot	797
J. B. Priestley	227	W. S. Maugham	215
W. S. Maugham	202	Evelyn Waugh	212
George Orwell	136	George Orwell	178
Evelyn Waugh	106	J. B. Priestley	152
P. H. Newby	78	Angus Wilson	77
Angus Wilson	71	Kingsley Amis	68
Kingsley Amis	41	John Wain	64
Cyril Connolly	40	Anthony Powell	59
John Wain	33	Cyril Connolly	57
Anthony Powell	32	Frank Swinnerton	50
John Osborne	20	P. H. Newby	48
William Golding	18	Philip Larkin	47
Frank Swinnerton	18	William Golding	30
Patrick Hamilton	17	John Osborne	25
Philip Larkin	14	Alec Waugh	20

William Cooper	13	William Cooper	18
Norman Collins	10	Paul Brickhill	12
Paul Brickhill	6	Patrick Hamilton	11
Alec Waugh	2	Norman Collins	10
Total	1395		2150

Table 3. Male comparison group in *Listener* and *TLS* 1946–60.

Since this list of names is eclectic and not representative, we refrain from calculating a combined ranking out of both journals. The relative strength of Anthony Powell in the *TLS* list can be explained by the fact that he was a regular reviewer at this time. In the *Listener*, this group of twenty men is mentioned a total of 1395 times during this period (compared to 684 mentions of the women’s top twenty). It is probable that there are other male authors not on our list who are mentioned quite frequently. And yet we find that our artificial sample of male contemporaries is mentioned twice as often as the top twenty women writers, by a margin of 44.2 % (67.1 % men vs. 32.9 % women).

In the *TLS*, we find these men mentioned 2150 times, compared to 886 times for the top twenty women. Here the gender imbalance is almost as strong, with the men dominating by a safe margin of 41.6 % (70.8 % men vs. 29.2 % women). Even if we leave out the number one in both lists (in the *TLS* and the *Listener*, T. S. Eliot alone commands around a quarter or a third of the mentions within this group, clear evidence of his cultural significance during the period¹⁶), the remaining 19 men still have a significant edge over their strongest female competitors:

Listener: 1084 vs. 684, or 61.3 % vs. 38.7 %. Margin: 22.6 %
TLS: 1353 vs. 886, or 60.4 % vs. 39.6 %. Margin: 20.8 %

A further comparison group are earlier canonical women writers. We compiled a list of twenty writers, all of them obvious candidates for inclusion. The frequencies of these twelve writers in the corpus are as follows:

<i>Listener</i>		<i>TLS</i>	
Jane Austen	168	Jane Austen	234
Virginia Woolf	155	Virginia Woolf	203

George Eliot	130	George Eliot	185
Emily Brontë	39	Charlotte Brontë	77
Charlotte Brontë	33	Emily Brontë	69
Elizabeth Gaskell ¹⁷	33	Mary Shelley	57
Frances (Fanny) Burney	23	Elizabeth Gaskell	48
E. Barrett Browning	19	E. Barrett Browning	37
Harriet Martineau	19	Christina Rossetti	30
Mary Shelley	16	Lady Montagu	27
Marie Corelli	12	Marie Corelli	20
Christina Rossetti	12	Harriet Martineau	15
Dorothy Richardson	7	Mary Wollstonecraft	12
Mary Wollstonecraft	6	Aphra Behn	11
Aphra Behn	5	Edith Nesbit	9
Lady Montagu	4	Dorothy Richardson	9
Frances Trollope	3	Frances Trollope	6
Edith Nesbit	2	Frances (Fanny) Burney	5
Charlotte Lennox	1	Margaret Oliphant	5
Margaret Oliphant	1	Charlotte Lennox	3
Total	688		1062

Table 4. Female canon comparison group, 1946–60.

The ranking is extremely similar in both journals, with only slight variations. Such stability in the “core canon” of English literature across time is only to be expected. One would be hard put to find more canonical women writers with a significant number of mentions in the corpus; Margaret Cavendish and Mary Braddon, for example, are mentioned only once in the TLS during this time, and Katharine Philips never.

If we compare the frequency (number of mentions) in the *Listener* of the top twenty British women writers 1946–60 (henceforth abbreviated as: ♀) with the frequency of the top twenty in the comparison groups (canonical women writers, ♀C; contemporary British male writers, ♂), we get the following results:

Top 20 ♀: 684

Top 20 ♀C: 688

Top 20 ♂: 1395

In the *Listener*, in a sample of sixty writers comprising 2767 mentions, the twenty British women writers (24.7 %) and the canonical women writers (24.9 %) each make up slightly less than a quarter, while the contemporary British male writers (50.4 %) reach an astonishing half. In this constellation, the contemporary men still accomplish to outweigh the dead and living women writers by a margin of 0.8 %.

Now we add another comparison group: the traditional male canon (♂C), or at least a selection of writers that are most likely to be prominent in this group. When we do this, we see – again, something to be expected – this core canon outshining all other groups. In the *Listener*, Shakespeare alone receives 1271 mentions between 1946 and 1960, Dickens 568, etc.¹⁸ The top twenty are as follows, with a total count of 5368 in the *Listener* and 9322 in the *TLS*:

<i>Listener</i>		<i>TLS</i>	
William Shakespeare	1271	William Shakespeare	2080
Charles Dickens	568	William Wordsworth	718
John Milton	387	Charles Dickens	689
William Wordsworth	333	Percy Shelley	651
John Keats	296	John Keats	615
Percy Shelley	276	John Milton	596
Thomas Hardy	274	Samuel Johnson	498
Alfred Tennyson	265	Lord Byron	469
Samuel Johnson	262	Thomas Hardy	431
Lord Byron	252	John Donne	404
Rudyard Kipling	209	Alfred Tennyson	401
Robert Browning	189	Robert Browning	302
John Dryden	141	John Dryden	298
John Donne	140	Rudyard Kipling	274
Anthony Trollope	136	Ben Jonson	238

Ben Jonson	118	Anthony Trollope	229
John Galsworthy	90	Daniel Defoe	192
Daniel Defoe	82	John Galsworthy	115
Samuel Richardson	43	Samuel Richardson	71
Hugh Walpole	36	Hugh Walpole	51
Total	5368		9322

Table 5. Male canon comparison group, 1946–60.

The results are best visualised in a chart:

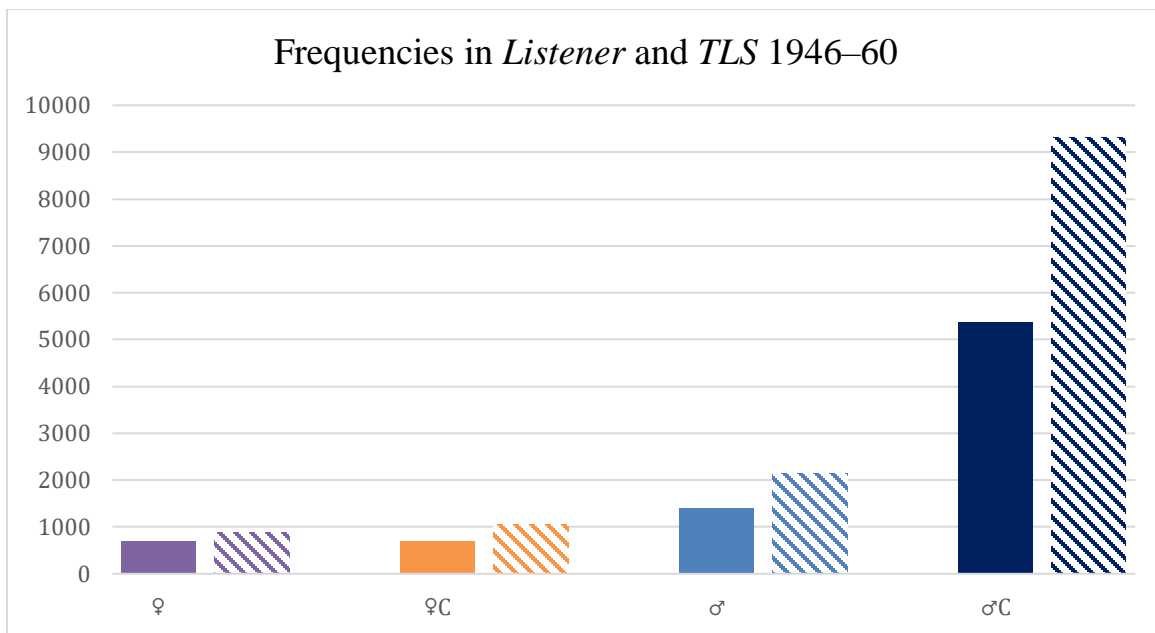


Chart 1. Frequencies of the top twenty in the four groups of authors in the *Listener* (filled columns) and *TLS* (striped columns), 1946–60.

♀ = contemporary women; ♀C = female canon; ♂ = contemporary men; ♂C = male canon.

The total number of mentions in this selection is 8135. Women writers together (♀+ ♀C) comprise 1372 mentions, the men together (♂+ ♂C) 6763. The resulting ratio is 16.9 % women vs. 83.1 % men.

Whereas in *The Listener*, contemporary men outflank the canonical and contemporary women writers (by a narrow margin of 0.8 %), in the *TLS* they do so by a more impressive margin of 5 %. Bringing in the all-time male canon, the overall picture becomes even clearer:

Out of a total of 13,420 mentions, contemporary British women writers comprise a share of merely 6.6 %; canonical women writers have 7.9 %. The sample of contemporary British male writers make up 16 %, and the traditional male canon 69.5 %. In both journals, once the traditional male canon is brought into play, the gender balance shifts dramatically. While the gender balance among the top authors mentioned was already quite unequal in the *Listener* (16.9 % to 83.1 %, a gap of 66.2 percentage points), this gap is even wider in the *TLS*, where all women authors in the top groups together comprise merely 14.5 % of the sample, compared to 85.5 % men, a gap of 71 percentage points. In other words, in both *Listener* and *TLS*, the women in our sample are outweighed by the men by roughly 6:1. Six of the men in our sample are mentioned before a woman has a chance.

Gender vs. canonicity

If we compare the difference between the frequencies of male and female authors to that between dead and living authors, we see that, in the *Listener*, the ratio between ‘ancients’ ($\sigma C + \text{♀}C$) and ‘moderns’ ($\sigma + \text{♀}$) in these samples is 74.4 % to 25.6 %, a gap of 48.8 % in favour of the ‘ancients’; in the *TLS*, it is 77.4 % to 22.6 %, a 54.8 % gap. Thus, we see (by comparing the gender gap to the canonicity gap) that gender trumps seniority as a differential category by 17.4 % in the *Listener* and by 16.2 % in the *TLS*.

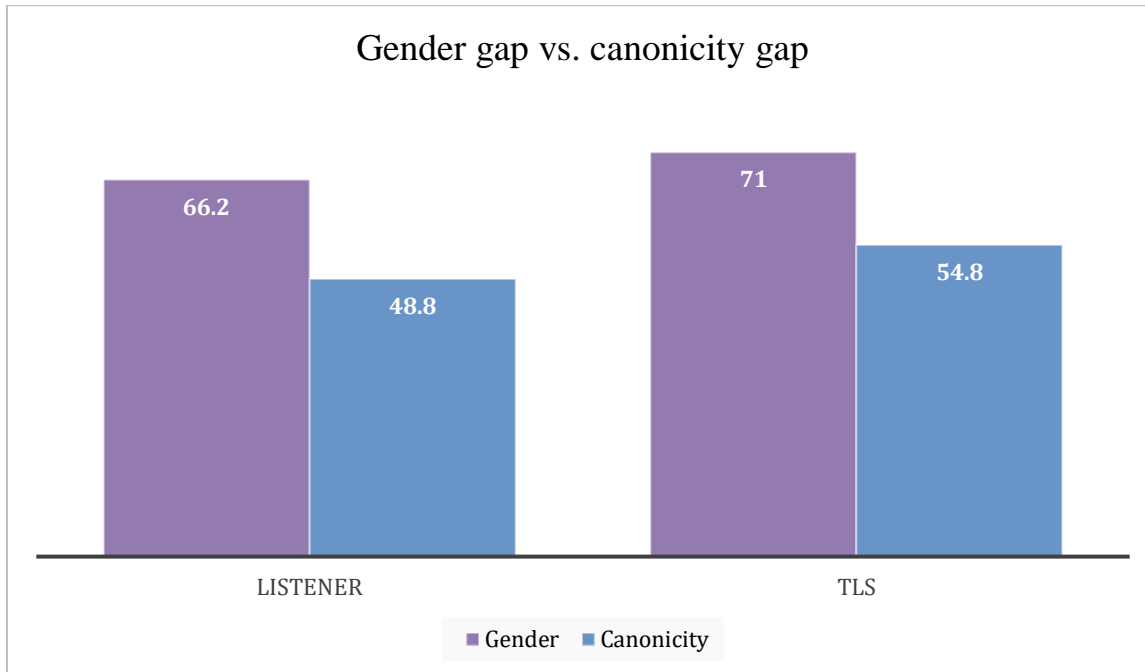


Chart 2. The size of the gender gap (difference in percentage points between mentions of men and women) compared to the canonicity gap (difference between mentions of canonical and contemporary authors) in Listener and TLS.

Would it make a difference if we left out the ‘top dogs’ in the male groups, i.e., Shakespeare and T. S. Eliot, who are constant cultural and literary reference points in the period? No; the distribution between men and women would still be overwhelmingly in favour of men: three to one in the *Listener*, four to one in the *TLS*, even if we disregard Shakespeare and T. S. Eliot.

In the next step, we divide the period into three five-year segments: 1946–50, 1951–55, and 1956–60, to see how much fluctuation or development we can find in these groups over time. To maintain comparability between the groups, and for the sake of practicality, we focus again on the top twenty authors in each group and for each sub-period. Especially for the groups of modern writers, the top twenty are not the same for each five-year segment. The ‘ancients’ demonstrate their usual relative stability. We count the totals for each group of twenty. Once again, the results are best displayed in the form of a few charts.

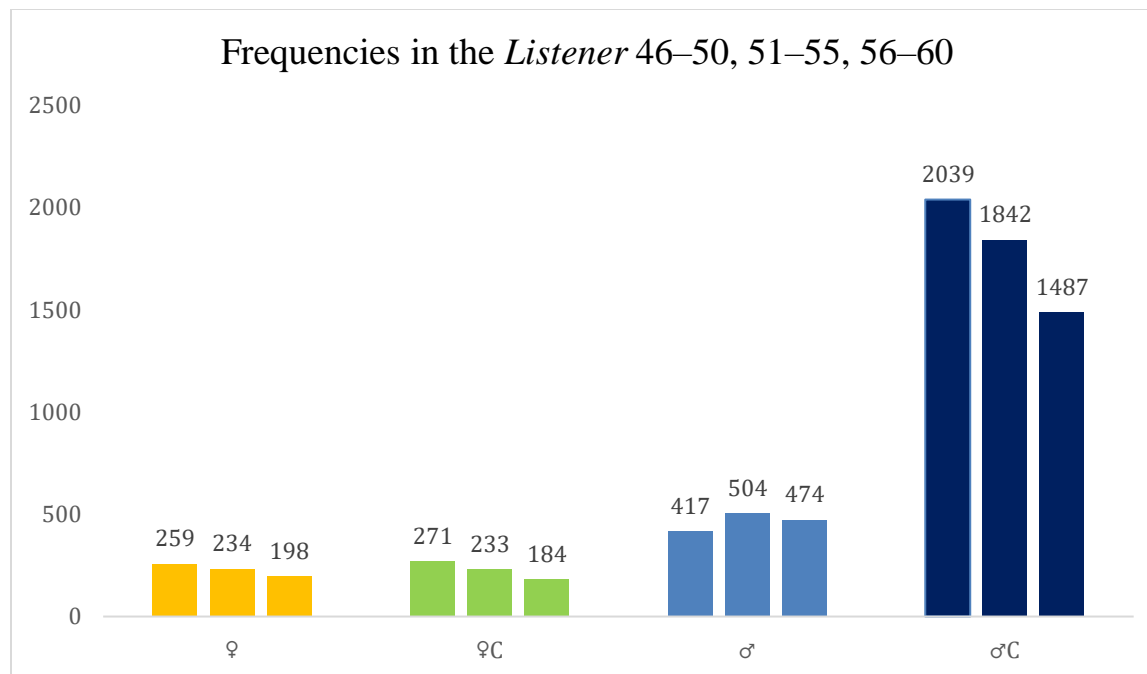


Chart 3. *Developing frequencies in the Listener in five-year spans, 1946–60.*

We can see that the weight of the traditional male canon drops considerably (from 2039 to 1487), but that it still dominates everything else. There is a slight rise in contemporary male writers, though the frequency remains very stable at around the 500 mark. There is, however, a noticeable drop in the frequency of contemporary women writers, from 259 to 198, and an even more marked drop in canonical women writers from 271 to 184. Overall, we can say that the reduced dominance of references to the traditional literary canon over this fifteen-year period benefits new male authors more than female ones.

We also want to know how these changes apply to the overall distribution of references to the male and female authors in our sample, as well as to the relation between canonical and contemporary authors. We do this in percentages to calculate, once again, the relative distance between men and women and between canonical and non-canonical writers in the sample.

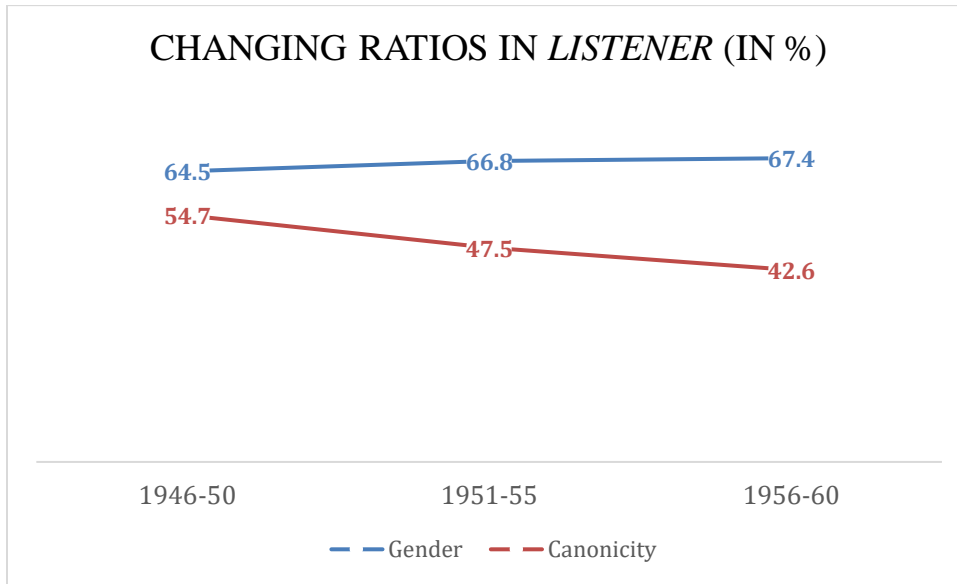


Chart 4. How the gender and canonicity gaps evolve in the Listener 1946–60.

This chart shows quite clearly that, while the ratio between canonical and contemporary authors is developing steadily towards a lower percentage of canonical authors and a higher percentage of contemporaries, changing by 12.1 % over these 15 years, the ratio between men and women (both canonical and contemporary) is favouring more and more men over women, increasing the gender gap by 2.9 %. The distance between men and women increases while the distance between canonical and contemporary authors decreases.

For the *TLS*, the results look as depicted in chart 5:

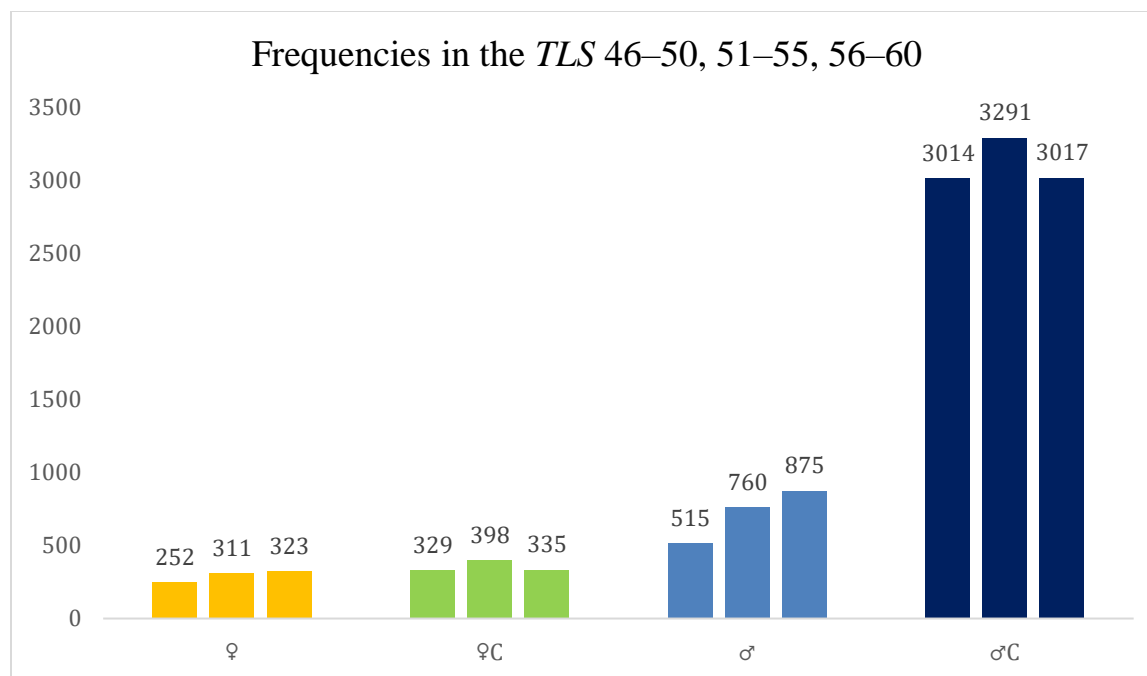


Chart 5. Developing frequencies in the *TLS* in five-year spans, 1946–60.

Here, the classical canon, both male and female, is more stable, but we also see a marked increase in references to contemporary authors, both male and female, with the contemporary men outweighing contemporary women writers. However, there is a steady rise of references to contemporary British women writers across the period.

The slight but steady rise in contemporary British women writers is accompanied by a slight decline of references to canonical women writers in the last five years of this period. In the *TLS*, the invocation of the traditional male canon first sees a slight rise, then ultimately arrives at its point of origin. Nevertheless, the canon is ultimately more stable than in the *Listener*, showing a more traditional, perhaps more conservative outlook of the magazine.¹⁹

Let us look at the distribution ratios between the two main categories of difference (gender and canonicity) and how they develop in the *TLS*.

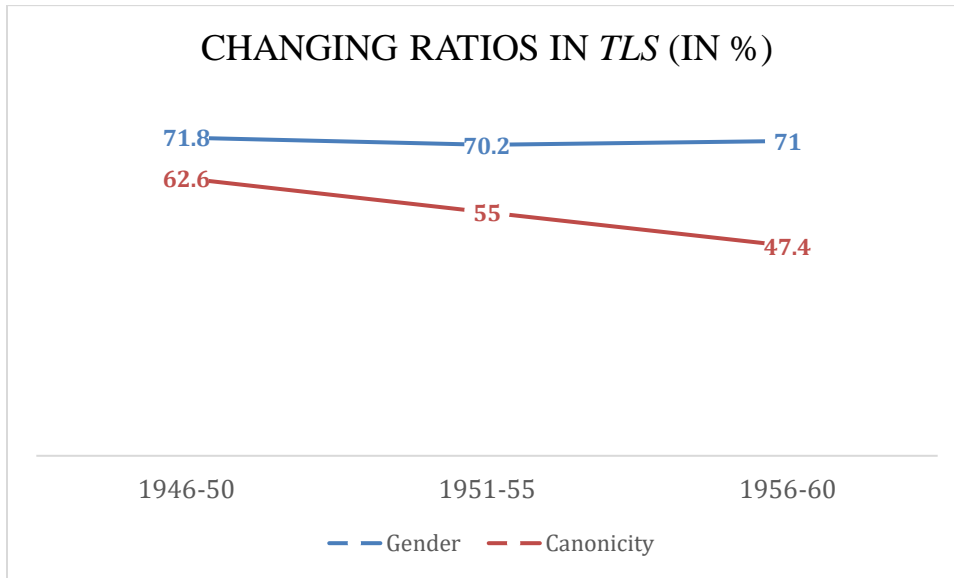


Chart 6. Developing ratios of gender and canonicity in the TLS, 1946–50.

Here the ratios tell a slightly different story; we see a more marked decline in the preference for canonical authors over contemporary ones (15.2 %, compared to 12.1 % in the *Listener*), but we also see the dominance of references to male rather than female authors barely decreasing over the fifteen-year period. Male authors still dominate; the distance towards their female competitors remains fairly constant.

When we take both these samples together and add them up, we get the following results: The traditional male canon declines by 5.9 %, the female canon by 1 %. This decline is accompanied by a slight increase in the attention paid to the top twenty contemporary women writers (from 511 out of 7096 to 521 out of 6893 = a 0.4 % rise), but also by a 6.5 % rise in the attention paid to a selection of contemporary male writers, especially in the years from 1946 to 1955. The attention paid to this selection of contemporary male authors in these two magazines thus rises by 6.1 % more than that paid to contemporary women, thus ultimately increasing the ‘gender gap’ in the literary field (at least in these two samples from the period).

Combining the ratios from *Listener* and *TLS* yields the following results:

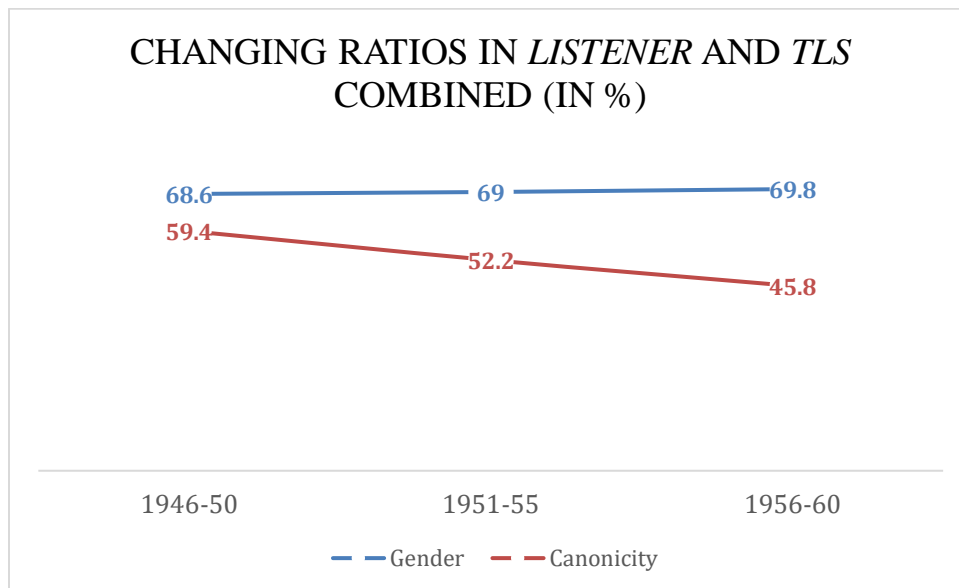


Chart 7. Changing gender and canonicity ratios in *TLS* and *Listener* combined.

Chart 7 shows the difference between references to men in relation to references to women on the one hand, and the difference between references to canonical in relation to contemporary writers on the other hand. Combining the evidence from the two journal databases we get a more differentiated overall picture of the literary field in Britain in the second half of the 1940s and in the 1950s. We see that the predominance of canonical authors gradually decreases by 13.6 %, but that they still dominate the field by a wide margin of 45.8 % in the late 1950s. The dead authors in our sample are mentioned much more frequently in the *TLS* and the *Listener* at this time than living authors.

We also see that women writers are at a clear disadvantage compared to men, dead or alive, and that men dominate the field by a margin of, on average, 69.1 %. This margin remains very stable over the entire period. If there is any significant change at all, it is not in terms of gender but in the slowly growing preference for contemporary writers rather than canonical authors. The gender ratio, as represented in these two journals, remains stable and firmly in favour of male writers.

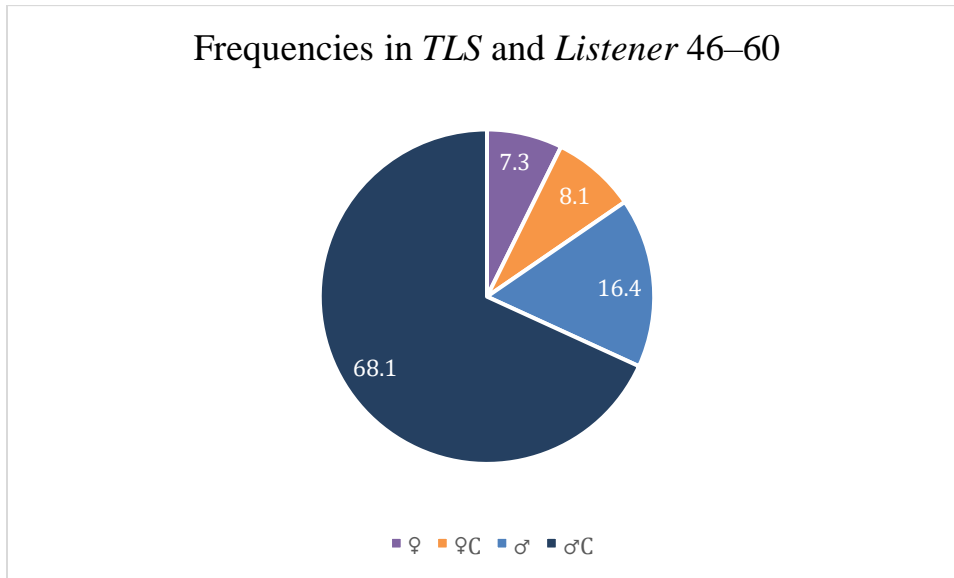


Chart 8. Combined frequencies (in percentages).

To round this off, we take a last look at the ratios between our sample groups.

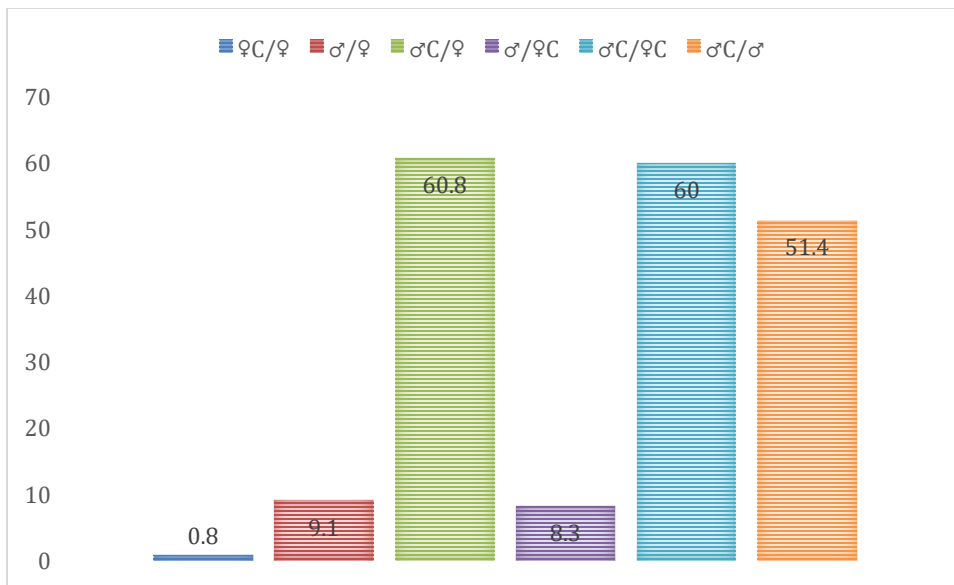


Chart 9. Average ratios between different sample groups (*TLS* and *Listener* combined).

This overview shows once again, but in more detail, how the odds are stacked against women in our sample. A living woman writer is at a 0.8 % disadvantage to a dead woman writer, but at a 9.1 % disadvantage compared to a male contemporary, and even at a 60.8 % disadvantage compared to a dead male author from the core canon. On the other hand, British male contemporary writers are only at a disadvantage of

51.4 % in relation to their famous dead colleagues, or 9.4 % less at a disadvantage than their female contemporaries. They have an advantage of 8.3 percentage points over dead women from the canon, only slightly less than their 9.1 % advantage over their female contemporaries. The canon of dead males is very much alive, and their advantage against their female counterparts is only slightly less substantial than their advantage against contemporary women writers: a whopping 60 %.

Later Developments

In a brief follow-up to these findings, we explore how 1950s women writers have fared, in relation to their male contemporaries, over time. For this, we confine our attention to the *TLS* and count the frequencies across the decades, using ten of the top twenty contemporary women writers and their male counterparts in the *TLS* sample for the period 1946–60.

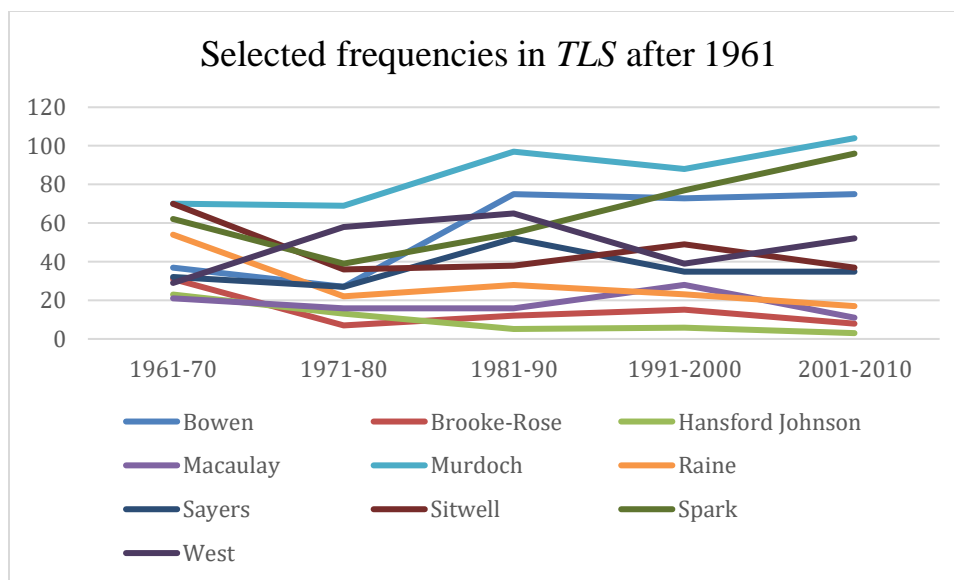


Chart 10. Selected frequencies of 1950s British women writers in the *TLS* 1961–2010.

We can see that, among an older generation of women writers, only Elizabeth Bowen regains her relatively high profile after a period of decline in the 1960s and 70s, stabilizing and maintaining a strong reputation in the 1980s. Rebecca West, Edith Sitwell, and Dorothy Sayers remain relatively stable; interest in West actually rises in the 1970s–80s and again after 2000, while Sitwell loses considerably in the 1960s

and then remains fairly stable on a lower level. The others remain hardly noticed. However, we also see Muriel Spark’s reputation, after a slight drop in the 1970s, constantly on the rise, and Iris Murdoch enjoying the highest reputation among this group; two younger women writers from the 1950s who have made it to the top.

This top, however, is still relative to the numbers reached by their male colleagues. The gender gap persists throughout the rest of the 20th century and into the 21st. While Iris Murdoch, born in 1919, reaches the highest value (104 mentions) in the early 2000s, her closest comparable male colleague in terms of generations, Kingsley Amis (born in 1922), peaks at 137 mentions in the 1980s. Evelyn Waugh reaches 210 in the 2000s, and Orwell a peak of 350.

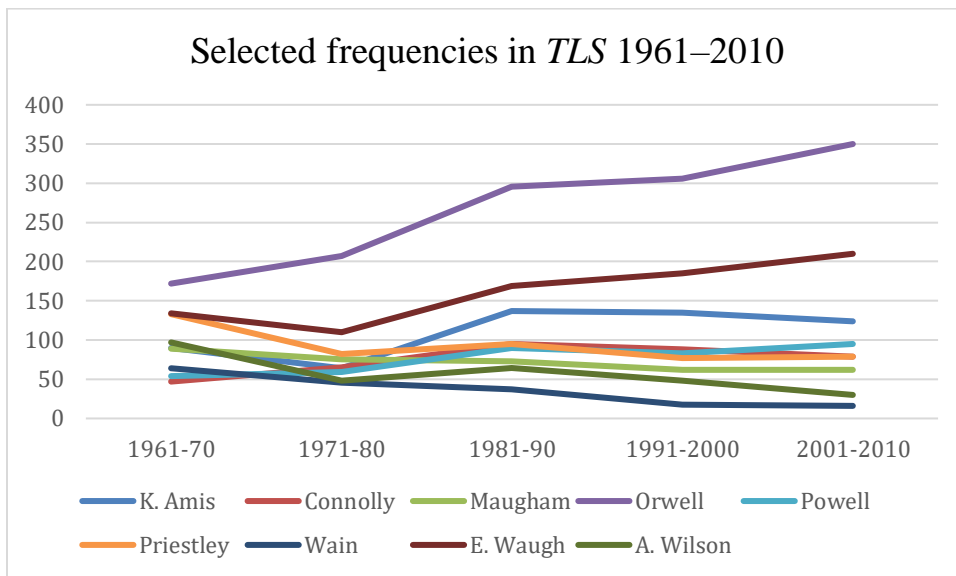


Chart 11. Selected frequencies of male British writers from the 1940s and 1950s in the TLS 1961–2010.

We have left the ‘top dog’ T. S. Eliot out of this; his reputation remains consistently high, so it would have been difficult to visualise the other authors’ careers in the chart. For comparison, we also look at the careers of three women writers who emerged in the 1960s rather than the 1950s: Angela Carter, Doris Lessing, and A. S. Byatt.

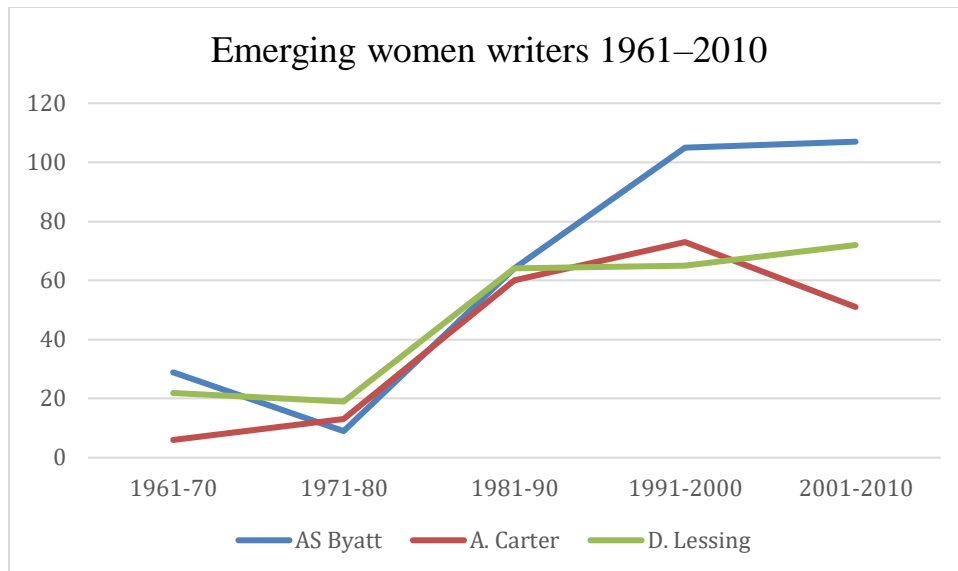


Chart 12: Emerging women writers from the 1960s in the *TLS* 1961–2010.

Here we can see a trio of new female stars rising; however, none of them, not even Byatt, who peaks at 107 mentions in the 2000s, reaches a competitive margin. Even though Byatt overtakes Murdoch, she is herself outrun by the likes of Amis and Waugh. If this experiment shows anything – and one would certainly need to gather and analyse more data to establish a broader and more representative selection of writers – it shows that women writers were not only comparatively underrepresented in the literary canon and the wider cultural field in Britain at mid-century, but that this underrepresentation still continues, at least inasmuch as it is reflected in the attention paid to writers by *TLS* reviewers, in the 20th and early 21st century.²⁰

Conclusion

We find that post-war British women writers between 1946 and 1960 were at a clear disadvantage compared to male authors, dead or alive. In our samples from the *TLS* and the *Listener*, men dominated the literary field by a margin of, on average, 69.1 %. This margin remained constant over the entire period, although other parameters changed. We found a slight decrease in the mentions of canonical authors in favour of contemporary writers. If there is any significant change at all, it is not in terms of gender but in the slowly growing preference for contemporary writers rather than canonical authors. Further studies would be needed to establish whether this is a more common trend in book reviewing after the Second World War.

To put it bluntly, in these samples, an author who is dead and male stands a much better chance to be mentioned by name than an author who is male and still alive; much less of a chance if she is dead and female, and even less if she is female and still alive. There is no reliable data to test if this is still the case today. One can at least hope that things have changed since the 1950s.

In this study, we have not been interpreting texts; we merely counted authors' names, which we had previously identified according to their gender and canonical status. In reading book reviews by numbers, we may have given the impression of treating literature like a competition. Yet literature, like many human activities, is *also* a competition (for attention, recognition, cultural capital). Treating it as such and counting the numbers has allowed us to capture and measure the gender and canon biases of literary journalism in the post-war era. These biases, in turn, can tell us much about changing literary tastes and cultural hierarchies, adding to our knowledge of the historical contexts of production, reception, and canon formation in which books are read, authors remembered or forgotten, and reputations established.

Notes

¹ This research is part of a project on “British Women Writers 1945–1960: Documentation, Interpretation, Cultural Impact Research”, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), grant number 264357303. The project website is <https://www.bwwbio.gwi.uni-muenchen.de>. – We would like to thank CA’s two anonymous reviewers for helpful suggestions.

² Next to the well-known foundational classics of feminist literary criticism by Gilbert and Gubar, Showalter, Millett, and Moi, see Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending. Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985); Clare Hanson, *Hysterical Fictions: The ‘Woman’s Novel’ in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); Victoria Stewart, “The Woman Writer in Mid-Twentieth Century Middlebrow Fiction: Conceptualizing Creativity,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 35 (2011): 21–36.

³ Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London/New York: Verso, 2013); Katherine Bode, *Reading by Numbers: Recalibrating the Literary Field* (London/New York/Delhi: Anthem Press, 2012). Bode’s pioneering quantitative study of the Australian book market offers a valuable parallel to our research; see in particular fig. 22 on p. 134, which – based on “the top twenty most critically discussed Australian authors” – shows an overall gender ratio for the 1950s that is very close to our results. For a related analysis of US book reviews between 1905 and 1925, see Matthew J. Lavin, “Gender Dynamics and Critical Reception: A Study of Early 20th-Century Book Reviews from *The New York Times*,” *Journal of Cultural Analytics* Jan. 31 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.22148/001.c11831>. For a related study, see also Melinda Harvey and Julieanne Lamond, “Taking the Measure of Gender Disparity in Australian Book Reviewing as a Field, 1985 and 2013,” *Australian Humanities Review* 60 (2016): 84–107.

⁴ Ted Underwood, David Bamman, and Sabrina Lee, “The Transformation of Gender in English-Language Fiction,” *Journal of Cultural Analytics* Feb. 13 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/fr9bk>.

⁵ Gaye Tuchman and Nina E. Fortin, *Edging Women Out. Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change* (London: Routledge, 2012).

⁶ Martin Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1914–1999*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 284.

⁷ See, for example, Niamh Baker, *Happily Ever After? Women's Fiction in Postwar Britain, 1945–60* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989); Jane Dowson, ed., *Women's Writing 1945–1960. After the Deluge* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Nick Turner, *Post-War British Women Novelists and the Canon* (London/New York: Continuum, 2010); Clare Hanson and Susan Watkins, eds., *The History of British Women's Writing, 1945–1975* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Sue Kennedy and Jane Thomas, eds., *British Women's Writing, 1930 to 1960. Between the Waves* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2020).

⁸ See the database we compiled for this project at <https://www.bwwbio.gwi.uni-muenchen.de>. Many of these women writers are never mentioned in the magazines considered here. The *Listener* mentions less than a third of these during this period (329 out of 1100, or 29.9 %). In the *TLS*, with its more specialized remit of book reviews, almost two thirds of our authors are covered (682 out of 1100, or 62 %).

⁹ The work of documenting post-war British women writers was begun at JLU Giessen by Ingo Berensmeyer with the assistance of Antonia Kohlmann and Liza Bauer. It was bolstered by additional research by Ingo Berensmeyer in the British Library and the Harry Ransom Center at UT Austin, to whose extremely efficient and friendly staff we are particularly grateful. We also gratefully acknowledge the ‘overwhelming list’ of lesser-known British, Irish, and American women writers 1910–1960 on the “Furrowed Middlebrow” blog at furrowedmiddlebrow.blogspot.com. Work on the quantitative data was continued at LMU Munich from 2018 onwards with the assistance of Elena Habelt and Clara Multerer.

¹⁰ Awards data from Jeanne J. Henderson and Brenda G. Piggins, *Literary and Library Prizes*, 8th ed. (New York/London: R. R. Bowker, 1973). Between 1945 and 1960, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Biography was awarded to 4 women and 12 men, for Fiction to 4 women and 12 men, the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize to 5 men, the Rose Mary Crawshay Prize for English Literature (an award only available to women) to 14 women, the Evening Standard Drama Award to 13 men, the William Foyle Poetry Prize to 1 woman and 10 men, the Hawthornden Prize to 3 men, the Richard Hillary Memorial Prize to 8 men, the Library Association Carnegie Medal to 8 women and 7 men, the Somerset Maugham Award to 3 women and 11 men, the Newdigate Prize to 11 men, the Frederick Niven Literary Award to 1 woman and 2 men, the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry to 2 women and 6 men, the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize to 5 women and 10 men, the Heinemann Award for Literature to 5 women and 26 men, and the Tom-Gallon Trust Award to 2 women and 6 men.

¹¹ For the term “core canon,” see Herbert Grabes, “Cultural Memory and the Literary Canon,” *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 311–320, 317. David Damrosch coins the related term “hypercanon” in his “World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age,” *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Haun Saussy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006), 43–53.

¹² Franco Moretti, “The Slaughterhouse of Literature,” *Distant Reading* (London/New York: Verso, 2013), 63–89.

¹³ Esmé Wynne-Tyson is also mentioned 18 times.

¹⁴ In addition to the data collection so far presented, we have also counted the mentions of British women writers in two newspapers, *The Times* and the *Financial Times*. The latter has remained incomplete due to restricted access to the archives. In *The Times*, though Sitwell, Sayers, and Bowen also make the top twenty, the leading figure is Yvonne Mitchell, mentioned 107 times, yet not as an author but an actor. Similarly, Joan Littlewood is mentioned 52 times for her theatre productions or, for example, Enid Blyton 21 times as a popular writer of children's books. Although these authors are referred to frequently, the arts sections of these newspapers do not have the same literary

focus as the *TLS* and the *Listener*. Thus, the findings have not been particularly useful for our research, and we have excluded them from this paper. All results are available on our website: <https://www.bwwbio.gwi.uni-muenchen.de>.

¹⁵ D. J. Taylor, *The Prose Factory. Literary Life in England Since 1918* (London: Vintage, 2016), 246.

¹⁶ When searching for T. S. Eliot, we made sure to avoid contamination with George Eliot by searching for ‘Eliot NOT George’, checking manually that the references were indeed to him.

¹⁷ Mentions of Elizabeth Gaskell include hits for ‘Mrs. Gaskell’, as she was still often called at the time.

¹⁸ Mentions of Samuel Johnson include references to ‘Dr. Johnson’; searching for John Milton, we excluded references to (Milton) Keynes; searching for Dickens, we excluded references to his great-granddaughter Monica, a moderately successful woman writer in this period (21 mentions in the *TLS*). Robert Browning is the most difficult to count with any degree of certainty, because of his common name but also because of potential confusions with references to baking, guns, and gravy. Thomas Hardy’s last name also posed difficulties because the *TLS* database does not distinguish between ‘Hardy’ and the adjective ‘hardy’. All mentions were checked manually.

¹⁹ We believe these changes are not attributable to deliberate editorial choices but rather reflective of wider cultural trends. Although the *TLS* changed editors twice during the period we investigate, Alan Pryce-Jones was at its helm between 1948 and 1959, providing a long phase of editorial stability.

²⁰ This phenomenon is not limited to the *TLS*. Recent surveys by VIDA (a non-profit organisation devoted to gender parity in the arts) show that many literary magazines still review more books by male than female authors, some by a factor of two to one. See www.vidaweb.org/the-count/. For Australia, the Stella Count, conducted between 2012 and 2018, offers more hopeful figures. See <https://stella.org.au/initiatives/research/stella-count-survey/>.