Introduction

Regally mounted upon her own war elephant, the proud queen rides forward into battle beside her king.

—Traiphumikkatha

TRADITIONAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE THAI WOMAN

This early depiction of the ideal Thai woman is from the *Traiphumikkatha*, a masterpiece of Thai Buddhist literature composed during the reign of King Thammaracha Lithai, in the early Sukhothai period (1239–1377). Another description of an admirable woman from the same work shows her to be more than proud and courageous: "She is neither tall nor short . . . dear and precious to everyone. . . . Her skin is as soft as cotton which has been fluffed a hundred times and moistened in the clear oil from the joint of a yak. When [the King's] body is cool, her body will be warm; when his body is hot, hers will be cool. . . . Whenever she speaks or laughs, her breath is scented, like blooming lotuses."[1]

Four centuries later, during the Ayuthya period (1350–1767), the ideal woman, far from mounting a war elephant of her own, was compared to the elephant's hind legs, indispensable but obviously created to follow.

These perceptions of woman—brave and courageous, yet fragrant and lovely; intelligent, yet willingly subordinate and biddable—are reflected in Thai literature to this day, often quite consciously. In "A Pot That Scouring Will Not Save," a 1985 short story by Anchan that is included in this anthology, a woman recalls her mother's advice: "'The woman must be like the hind legs of the elephant . . . the husband like the front legs, which, though they must always lead, cannot move the elephant by themselves.' And: 'A woman must be like a reed, my daughter. In the dark of night, it may be whipped by the

1. National Identity Board, *Women in Thai Literature: Book 1* (Bangkok: Office of the Prime Minister, 1987), 19–29 (hereafter cited as *WTL*). The *Traiphumikkatha* is more fully described in Klaus Wenk, *Thai Literature: An Introduction* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1995).

fiercest storm, yet we always find it the next morning, swaying in the breeze, glistening with dew drops, its gentle strength a miracle.'"

During the Ayuthya period, Thai society was divided by a rigid class system that extended to gender: inferiors served superiors; women served parents, husbands, and children; sisters served brothers.[2] But the practice of corvée labor effected a contradiction in this hierarchical system, for when men were away from home for months at a time, working on construction projects or participating in military campaigns, women became the de facto heads of households. Then, as now, most Thai women were responsible for handling family finances, a responsibility that extended to the management of family-run businesses and sometimes to work outside the home.

Today, many Thai women attain the same educational levels as their brothers, although preference is usually given to sons if a choice must be made for economic reasons. Middle- and upper-class women practice law, own and manage banks and businesses, and serve at high levels of government. For decades the percentage of Thai physicians who are women has been higher than in the United States. One of the nation's largest universities, Silpakorn, is led by a woman as of this writing, Chaisri Sri-arun. Women are at least as numerous as men in nearly all university faculties and frequently serve as department heads. Government scholarships and grants for study abroad are awarded strictly on the basis of merit, regardless of gender. I have noticed over the years that Thai women who have gone abroad on government scholarships tend to continue their relationships with other women who have had this experience. Decades later, they still are meeting for lunch, going on trips, and so on; there is no question that this "old girl" network is socially and also professionally beneficial.

Despite these significant legal, social, and professional gains, Thai women must contend with the ideal image of the dutiful daughter, the lovely, chaste and loyal wife, and the self-sacrificing and devoted mother. For women who work outside the home, personal time is nonexistent. Doing things for other people is so important a value in Thai life, especially for women, that any time left over is immediately reassigned to such activities as visits to elderly relatives or attendance

2. For the sake of convenience, the word *Thai* will be generally used, although the name of the country was officially changed from Siam to Thailand only in 1939.

at funeral rites, which are of great importance.[3] The "superwoman" problem that is written about in the West is magnified in Thai society. Moreover, the emphasis on physical beauty and on beautiful behavior is unabating, continuing to reflect the words of Khunying Kirati, the heroine of a 1937 novel who declared that "women are born to decorate the earth."[4] In recent years, the standards of beauty have become ever more difficult to achieve. Craig J. Reynolds writes: "The marketing of female Thai beauty in the global consumer culture has led to a new ideal of beauty, a paragon of regional and global personhood. Contestants in the beauty pageants often undergo cosmetic surgery to appear more Eurasian, and the Eurasian face is popular on Thai television. Advertisements in the glossy magazines show a distinct preference for male and female models who are light-skinned with Eurasian features, a kind of pan-Asian model of beauty that suits the exporters of Thai products to Asian markets."[5]

One has only to glance at the covers of Thai women's magazines to verify Reynolds's observation. I believe that the most important, although not the only, reason for the "whiter is better" criterion for beauty, is that while poor women toil in the fields and are dark, wealthy women are protected from the sun and therefore are pale by comparison. In addition, there is no question that the "Eurasian" ideal of beauty (never "Amerasian," which connotes the GI babies of the 1960s and 1970s) is a legacy of the years between approximately 1850 and 1925, when Thailand was struggling to avoid colonization by either England or France. The Thai kings who reigned during these years and their advisers worked hard to identify themselves and their nation with the European conquerers rather than with their own vanquished neighbors.[6] It is important to remember that in Thailand, the Victorian era is now recalled as an exciting time during which Siamese aristocrats traveled to Europe, met the members of European royal families *as equals*, studied in universities, and brought back things that

3. Depending upon the social class of the individual who has died, many funeral rites may take place before the actual cremation, which may occur months or even a year or more after death.

4. An excerpt of this novel, Sri Burapha's *Behind the Painting*, is included in this work.

5. Craig J. Reynolds, "Predicaments of Modern Thai History," *South East Asian Research* 2, no. 1 (March 1994): 75.

6. This is one of the major contentions of Thongchai Winichakul's *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

appealed to them, such as Victorian furniture, art, fashions, and ideas about literature. The typical photograph of a Thai noblewoman at the turn of the century shows her proudly dressed in a linen blouse with leg-of-mutton sleeves, her luxuriant dark hair stylishly poufed. Gone are the two-inch-long thatch of hair, the betel-blackened polished teeth, and the turmeric-yellowed skin that were perceived as beautiful during the previous several reigns.

During the past few years, admiration of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868–1910) and his reign in general has grown to such an extent that his photograph now hangs on the wall of nearly every store, bank, and noodle shop in the kingdom. Portraits and photographs of Queen Saovapha and of the two sons who succeeded him on the throne, Vachiravudh (Rama VI) and Prachatipok (Rama VII), also are popular.[7]

At the end of the twentieth century, the Eurasian/Victorian (and Edwardian) look is very popular for cover illustrations of books about Thai women, including two works published by the Office of the Prime Minister, in English: *Women in Thai Literature: Book 1* and *Thai Women*, a handsome book commemorating the 1992 Fifth Cycle Birthday of Queen Sirikit.[8] The overall objective of the latter book, aside from celebrating the queen's birthday and the major events of her life, is to celebrate the Thai woman, her qualities and her achievements, and especially her role in the life of the Thai nation. The illustration on the cover is a pastel rendering of a pale young woman in a modified nineteenth-century costume. But aside from her dark hair and something about the eyes that vaguely suggests Asian origins, she could be European.[9]

7. See appendix, "Kings of the Chakri Dynasty." In accordance with general practice, the first three kings of the Chakri dynasty, which was founded in 1782, will be referred to as Rama I, Rama II, and Rama III; the subsequent six kings will be identified by parts of their names: King Mongkut, King Chulalongkorn, King Vachiravudh, King Prachatipok, King Ananda Mahidol, and King Phumipol Adulyadej. King Vachiravudh (Rama VI, r. 1910–25) instituted the use of the "Rama" titles, because he believed that the lengthy Siamese names were too difficult for Western foreigners. The next king, his brother Prachatipok, refused to be known as "Rama VII"; but the practice continued, no doubt because it was useful.

8. A cycle consists of twelve years. The fifth cycle birthday, celebrating sixty years of life, has traditionally been an important celebration since in the past few people lived to celebrate the sixth cycle at seventy-two.

9. An interesting, relevant discussion of the significance of cover art appears in Indira Karamcheti's "Cover Stories," *The Women's Review of Books*, vol. 12, no. 4 (January 1994): 20–21.

Such contradictory perceptions and expectations of Thai women are at the heart of this anthology and are reflected in its title. While I was translating the selections and wondering what sort of title could reflect so vast a range of short stories and novel excerpts, I asked a number of Thai women to complete the sentence, "A woman should be . . ." By far, the most common answer was "like a flower," even if the respondent's opinion of such a depiction was decidedly negative. "On the other hand," one young woman said, "there is also the image of the lioness stalking the land, protecting her family. This is a dilemma, for some of us. Can one woman be both a *lioness*, who is active and strong, and a *flower*, which doesn't go anywhere and is simply beautiful? Can a woman be a flower that roars or a lioness that blooms?"

WOMEN IN CLASSICAL THAI LITERATURE: TWENTIETH-CENTURY REFLECTIONS

Although much has been written by Thais and by foreign observers and scholars about the subordinate status of women during the Ayuthya period, female characters in poetic epics of that era are at least as complex and as interesting as women in modern and contemporary fiction. Indeed, female characters in early Thai literature are almost sybaritic by comparison with their twentieth-century counterparts. Until recently, women in Thai short stories and novels have had to live up to the Victorian conventions upon which modern Thai fiction was built; and to be accurate, it is only the more daring writers who have attempted to challenge the status quo. In the famous Ayuthya era epic poem *Lilit Phra Law,* or *Lílìt Phrá Lɔɔ* (A poem about Phra Law), two princesses fall in love with the same young king, beguile him with their charms, and cheerfully share his favors until disaster strikes them all.[10] According to the authors of *Women in Thai Literature,* in *Lilit Phra Law* the reader sees "how the high-born ladies use their feminine guiles to get the man of their desire without jeopardizing the behavioural standards expected of women of their status." The perceived strength of women also is displayed in this story

10. The titles of *Lílìt Phrá Lɔɔ* and other well-known Thai literary works are given their most frequently used English spellings, followed by phonetic spellings consistent with references to other Thai titles in this work.

through the "demonstrat[ion of] royal valour and the determination of the two princesses who stand beside the man they love until death . . . which is the climax of the romance."[11]

Phra Law also has a loyal and uncomplaining wife with whom he shares a tender scene before leaving her for the amorous princesses:

216

"Fevered and sad to part with my love,
Wrong may I be to leave love for love.
Should I remain, flames would consume my heart,
Leave you I must but shall soon return."

217

"If you go hence and consort with the two?
Would you ever come back to me?
Think not, hope not that they would set you free,
For they will imprison you in their embrace."

218

"Not from hate do I forsake you.
No distance can sever our love.
A lotus leaves a gossamer thread when plucked,
Fret not for I ne'er will forget my dear beloved."[12]

Each female character in this famous and beloved poem—whether wife, lover, or mother—is portrayed as a complex individual with plausible motives. In the 1960s, the woman writer Suwanee Sukhontha created female characters who are strikingly reminiscent of the princesses of *Lilit Phra Law*—led by their sexual desires, knowingly heading for disaster, and willing to take their chances. But Thai critics and readers do not typically look for such echoes of their own literary tradition when considering contemporary fiction, and so Suwanee's writing has either been compared with Western models or dismissed as "autobiographical." An interesting project would be an examination of Suwanee's work in the light of classical Thai works, with which this well-educated author was certainly familiar.

The epic poem *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, or *Khun Cháang Khun Phɛɛn*,

11. National Identity Board, *WTL*, 63.
12. Ibid., 71.

had its origin sometime during the Ayuthya period but was substantially revised and polished during the first two reigns of the Chakri dynasty by the poet Sunthon Phu (1786–1855). In this poem, two men, Khun Chang and Khun Phaen, are rivals in love, both desirous of the lovely Wanthong. Although Khun Chang is wealthy, he is homely, bald, uncouth, and fat, while Khun Phaen, who was born poor, has become a glorious military hero who also is handsome, knowledgeable about women, and versed in the magic arts. Wanthong is never able to make a clear and final choice between these two men; she desires Khun Phaen, but she is fond of Khun Chang and pities him: "How miserable it is to have been born a woman! . . . I have been punished with . . . sufferings because I was in no control of my wavering heart. It is a pity that such a fickle heart should be housed in so lovely a body. Blessed with unsurpassed beauty and womanly skills, how could I sink so low?"[13]

Finally, Wanthong is forced to make a choice: "Khun Chang appealed to the King who commanded Wanthong to choose who [*sic*] she would like to live with: Khun Phaen, Khun Chang or Chamuen Wai, her son. She was reluctant to choose and evaded the issue by asking the King to decide for her. Enraged by her seemingly insatiable promiscuity, the King ordered her executed."[14]

Several elements of Wanthong's tragic life and death are routinely reflected in Thai novels, short stories, films, and television dramas focused on women's lives. Three of these elements are: (1) a woman's consciousness of the misery she experiences and feels as the natural and inescapable result of being born female; (2) her desire to please everyone she loves, often to her own detriment; and (3) her frank acceptance of her own beauty and of its negative effects on her life.

Phra Aphaimani, or *Phrá Aphaymanii,* is an eighteenth-century masterpiece composed by Sunthon Phu. Although Phra Aphaimani is the hero and leading character, practically all of the female characters are stronger and more resourceful than he is. He is abducted by a sea ogress, rescued by a mermaid, and loves a woman who not only refuses him but also runs away to become a nun. He relies entirely upon the advice of his female counselor and finally becomes king, whereupon his queen gives orders and leads soldiers into battle.

13. Ibid., 140.
14. Ibid., 147.

Despite all, he remains the hero of the story and is desired by women for his grace and beauty.

One of the many interesting women in *Phra Aphaimani* is the brilliant Nang Wali, who has been damned with faint praise as "the first woman in public service." "There was a thirty-four year old spinster named Wali who had a swarthy complexion. She was so ugly that not a man bothered to look at her. . . . She said to the king, 'I have not a bit of doubt about my ugly appearance, but knowledge, like an unblemished diamond, is my spiritual beauty. Among your host of beautiful concubines, you can never find as learned a one as I.'"[15]

Nang Wali is the prototype of what I shall call the "authentic non-ideal" female character in Thai literature. She is not and can never be an ideal (beautiful, subservient, graceful) Thai woman, but she is a kind of woman whom every woman either knows or is. Some of the best examples of such characters in modern fiction are found in the work of the author and educator M. L. Boonlua Kunchon Thepyasuwan (1911–82), who wrote fiction under her first name, "Boonlua."[16]

The authentic non-ideal woman in Boonlua's work is often the heroine's best friend: a well-bred, intelligent, educated, outspoken person who is a bit sharp-tongued and very good-hearted. She also is plain and unlikely to marry. One such character is Adcharaa, in the short story "*Sanay jawak*," or "Sanàay jàwàk."[17] The virtually untranslatable title, which literally means "[the] charm [of the] ladle," refers to the housekeeping and cooking ability of the ideal Thai woman. The main female character in the story, a bride named Phachongchid, is a traditionally raised woman who is frustrated because of her inability to please her foreign-educated husband. She has been taught never to argue with a man and to do everything possible to provide a gracious, beautiful home, the center of which is the exquisitely set dinner table laden with perfectly prepared food. Her new husband is bored with these limitations. If Phachongchid is the ideal Thai woman, her friend Adcharaa falls sadly short. Herbert P. Phillips writes, "[Adcharaa is a] character who exists only as an occasional verbal allusion. . . . She

15. Ibid., 127–28.

16. "M. L." is the abbreviation of *mɔ̀m lŭang*, a title indicating that one is the great-grandchild of a king; Boonlua was her given name, Kunchon her family name, and Thepyasuwan her married name.

17. The original Thai version of this short story is included in a collection of Boonlua's short stories entitled *Chàak nùng nay chiiwít* (approximately, "act one in life"; the stories are about problems encountered by young adults).

is an unmarried, physically unattractive, old classmate of the heroine [and] is going overseas for an advanced degree."

Although her role in the story is small, I would say that Adcharaa is far more than "an occasional verbal allusion." She is a woman very like M. L. Boonlua, who went abroad to earn a master's degree at forty and was nearly fifty when she married. That the ghost of Nang Wali is alive and well between the covers of Boonlua's books is particularly fitting, for Boonlua was not only an important modern fiction writer but also a scholar and teacher of classical Thai literature who was well acquainted with Sunthon Phu, *Phra Aphaimani*, and Nang Wali.

PRE-TWENTIETH-CENTURY WOMEN WRITERS

Intriguing female characters abound in classical Thai literature, but there are few records of women writing before the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the fact that the contributions of a few woman writers are not only acknowledged but also respected suggests that there may well have been other women who wrote, but whose contributions were not recorded. Since the revision of dramas performed at court was a continual process and since women performed all the parts within the inner precincts of the palace, it is almost certain that they had a hand in these revisions. Two daughters of King Borommakot (r. 1733–58), Chao Faa Kunthon and Chao Faa Mongkut, were recorded as contributing excellent verses to the drama *Inao*, but nothing else is known of them.

Another pair of sisters, Khun Phum and Khun Suwan, ladies at court during the final years of the reign of King Rama III (1824–51) and the early years of the reign of King Mongkut (Rama IV, 1851–68), may fairly be considered the first important Thai women authors. Khun Phum was a competent poet, but Khun Suwan was truly brilliant. During the reign of King Chulalongkorn, Prince Damrong Rajanupap, a great scholar who was the king's brother and chief adviser, wrote an essay in which he asserts that Khun Suwan was insane, an opinion accepted until the middle of the twentieth century when literary scholars took another look and found not insanity but true genius.

According to Wibha Kongkanan, professor of Thai literature at Silpakorn University, in Nakhon Pathom, Khun Suwan's psychological

insights about life at court, her subtle use of imagery, and her sheer mastery of poetic forms place her not only among her male contemporaries but far ahead of most. Khun Suwan's most important works are two unfinished, satirical poetic dramas entitled *Phra Malethethai*,[18] or *Phrá Maléethěethăy* (Prince Malethethai) and *Unarut roi ruang*, or *Unarút rɔ̂ɔy rûang* (literally, "the hundred tales of Unarut").[19] The character Phra Malethethai was invented by Khun Suwan; "Unarut" is the name of a famous hero in Thai literature. The obvious purpose of both works is to entertain, and many Thais love to sing excerpts from them, as Western opera enthusiasts sing favorite arias. These dramatic works were not written to be staged but to be recited in a private setting.

In *Phra Malethethai*, the prince, on a forest tour, awakens in the night to find a beautiful woman lying asleep at his side. He admires her body, awakens her, woos her, and finds her willing, and they make love. Neither of them knows that the god Indra has taken the woman from her bedchamber and put her by the prince's side. Although the story, theme, plot, and characters are conventional, the concept of a woman being spirited away in her sleep to meet a man, to love and be loved, is anything but conventional. *Phra Malethethai* is a female fantasy of sexual adventure and escape from repression; the intervention of the god Indra absolves her of responsibility. The name of this heroine, "Talaeng-gaeng," or *Talɛɛngkɛɛng*, can be literally translated as "the place where the prisoner is to be executed," by which Khun Suwan suggests that a woman's safe, chaste bedchamber is a prison.

The other famous work by Khun Suwan, *Unarut roi ruang*, is important for somewhat different reasons. First, it makes plain the fact that Khun Suwan had read widely, in a society in which no public education existed. Whatever knowledge she had of literature must have been gained in her home or at court. *Unarot roi ruang* reflects a profound knowledge of the classical dramas, preserving several works of Thai imaginative literature while developing a new style, the medley. The tale is filled with characters from Thai masterpieces and several minor works in the poetic tradition, but these charac-

18. *Phra* means "monk," and is also used as a prefix for many religious and royal proper names.

19. Wibha Kongkanan, letter to author, October 1, 1995.

ters are amusingly re-created. It is a challenge to the reader to identify not only the characters but also the linguistic tricks Khun Suwan uses, tricks grounded in the Pali and Sanskrit elements of Thai grammar. In addition, she invented an unconventional system for use within the *klon,* or *klɔɔn,* verse form she used, in which each line contains seven to nine syllables. A combination of meaningful and meaningless words might share a given line, or a whole line of meaningful words might be followed by a line that appears completely nonsensical. Careful readings by scholars have untangled this puzzle of words to find a phenomenal cleverness with poetic language.

Because sexual desire was considered to be a delicate subject and because Khun Suwan was determined to write about it anyway, she devised elaborate linguistic and stylistic strategies. It is possible that she encouraged the idea that she was insane to protect herself, for a work composed by a madwoman could be overlooked and her position at court preserved. Wibha suggests that the complexity of *Unarut roi ruang* may explain why it has been so steadfastly ignored by scholars, even though it has been available since Khun Suwan wrote it: "Some of the male scholars probably know that their knowledge about Thai literature is limited, and is clearly inferior to a woman writer of the old days."[20]

In his 1995 book *Thai Literature: An Introduction,* Klaus Wenk makes no mention at all of the prolific and innovative Khun Suwan but notes that her sister Khun Phum was "the first Thai poetess. . . . [She] appears to have been a person with a positive attitude towards life and moral values. . . . Nevertheless, she [indicates that she] regrets 'being a woman' and in the life to come she would like to be 'a handsome man.' It follows that this resolute lady Khun Phum does not stand for the ideas and aims of the feminist movement."[21] On the other hand, perhaps Khun Phum's expressed desires to return in a future life as "a handsome man" suggests something of her notorious sister's caustic style and stealthy ways.

When the new campus of Silpakorn University opened in Nakhon Pathom in 1968, Khun Suwan was chosen as one of four Thai authors to be studied by all freshmen majoring in liberal arts. The other three

20. Wibha Kongkanan, conversation with author, July 15, 1995.
21. Wenk, *Thai Literature,* 64.

authors were modern: two men, M. R. Kukrit Pramoj and Ajin Banjapan, and the contemporary woman novelist Krisna Asoksin. Studying these authors together represented a significant and controversial departure from customary ways of teaching Thai literature. In general, the word *wannakodi* denotes classical poetry and drama, and is distinct from *wannakaam*, which denotes modern, Western-style short stories and novels.[22] When students in Silpakorn's new program were encouraged to compare Khun Suwan's crafty court ladies of the nineteenth century with the scheming society matrons of Krisna's mid-twentieth-century popular novels, not all faculty members were pleased.

In view of the fact that most of Khun Suwan's work was considered incomprehensible during her lifetime, proof of insanity until less than thirty years ago, and cause for contention when it finally was taught in a university in the late 1960s, it is ironic that her work is now cited to exemplify Thai women writers' opportunities, as in this remark by Mattani Rutnin: "[Khun Suwan's] satire on lesbianism [at] court . . . is evidence of Thai women's freedom of expression and critical minds which have led to their continuing success in the world of Thai literature from the early history of Siam to the present."[23]

FICTION

The Early Modern Period

The first recognizably modern Thai short stories and novels were written during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by men who had been sent to Europe for a university education, and who returned to Siam eager to apply Western literary forms to Siamese subjects. It is generally agreed that the first complete Thai novel is a much-altered version of an English novel by Marie Corelli, *Vendetta! or, the Story of One Forgotten*.[24] Phraya Surintharacha, a Thai aristocrat studying in England, was so taken with Corelli's book that he wrote a

22. According to Wibha, a contemporary poetic drama would be classified as *wannakodi*, not *wannakaam*, if it strictly follows a traditional form and contains characters and content considered by literary scholars to meet classical requirements and standards.

23. Mattani Rutnin, *Modern Thai Literature: The Process of Modernization and the Transformation of Values* (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 1988), 12.

24. Reprint, London: Methuen, 1979.

Siamized version of it entitled *Khwaam phayabaat*, or *Khwaam phàyàbàat* (Revenge).[25] In the story, a grief-stricken man recounts his tragedy: after killing his faithless wife and her presumed lover, he was forced to flee—in Corelli's novel, to South America; in Phraya Surintharacha's, to Siam. *Khwaam phayabaat* was serialized in the magazine *Lak witaya* in 1902, and subsequently published as a book. The great success of the work prompted a cheerful parody entitled *Khwaam may phayabaat*, or *Khwaam mây phayabàat* (*No* revenge), by Khru Liam.

The practice of translating or creating versions of Western novels continued until the middle of the 1920s; favorite authors included O. Henry, H. Rider Haggard, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. It should be noted that translations of Western (and Chinese) works have continued to be popular to the present day, and that translations tend to be loose, reflecting the translators' beliefs about what Thai readers will or will not like. Translations of literature from other languages into Thai also reflect common standards of decency; for example, sexually explicit passages are almost always missing from the Thai version. When I have asked translators how they justify these expurgations, the usual response is that such passages are "not necessary" or "might be read by young people."

King Vachiravudh (Rama VI, r. 1910–25), who was educated in England and graduated from Sandhurst, was an accomplished and prolific author whose works—including essays, plays, and short stories—number in the hundreds. His influence on the advance of modern Thai literature is incalculable. A great number of magazines rose and fell during his reign, 128 intended for men and five for women. The first woman's magazine, *Narirom*, or *Naariirom*,[26] was published in 1919. Everything in the magazine, including advertising, was composed in the then-popular *klon* verse form. Not only was the publisher-editor identified as a woman (Nai Soop, or Nai Sùup), but women's contributions were also enthusiastically solicited. Moreover, a prize of four bahts, now worth less than a dollar but then a substantial amount of

25. An accurate, complete Thai translation of Corelli's original *Vendetta!* by the novelist V. Vinicchayakul (pen name of Vinita Dithiiyon, chair of the Department of Thai Literature at Silpakorn University) was published by Dok Yaa, Bangkok, in 1987.

26. *Naarii* is a polite word for "woman; lady," which usually appears in compounds; *rom* means "charming; beautiful." Information on this magazine is taken from pages 2 and 3 of *Phûuyĭng bon nâa kradàat* (Woman on paper), a special publication honoring one hundred years of women's magazines that was distributed at a conference in February 1991.

money, was offered for the best literary work submitted within the year. Many submissions were received. Eventually it was discovered that the editor of *Narirom* was the king's uncle, Prince Damrong, and the first individual to receive the literary prize was King Vachiravudh, for a *klon* work entitled *Khon say ta san,* or *Khon săay taa sân* (A near-sighted person).

Before the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932, several women's magazines were published that advocated progressive political and social ideas. Among these were *Siam yupadii,* or *Sayăam yúpadii* (Young Siamese girl) and *Ying thai,* or *Yĭng thay* (Thai woman), both of which contained strongly worded essays in favor of women's suffrage and other subjects of interest to feminists. Neither contained the love poems in *klon* form that had been the mainstay of *Narirom* and its successors; and both were shut down after a few issues.

In 1924, the first issue of *Thai kasem* was published. This magazine soon became very influential and published the work of every important writer of the 1930s, including Dok Mai Sot, a woman whose novels are still read today.

Very few women were sent abroad to be educated before the 1940s, which makes all the more impressive the fact that women wrote many of the successful early novels. All of these writers came from aristocratic, progressive families that had sent them to convent schools founded by European or American missionaries; some studied with English or French governesses as well. While their brothers were studying in Europe during the 1920s, M. L. Bubpha and M. L. Boonlua were following in the footsteps of other sisters who had lived and written before them: Chao Faa Kunthon and Chao Faa Mongkut, the daughters of King Borommakot, and Khun Phum and Khun Suwan, the court ladies who had created such a stir a century before, and whose talents had not yet been re-evaluated.[27]

Bubpha and Boonlua, born in 1905 and 1911, respectively, busily devoured English and French novels while studying at St. Joseph's Convent School in Bangkok.[28] They were certain that they could write

27. In 1968, when she founded the Faculty of Arts at the new campus of Silpakorn University, M. L. Boonlua made the decision that Khun Suwan's work would be studied by all students of that faculty during their freshman year.

28. M. L. Boonlua was educated in convent schools in both Bangkok and Penang during the 1920s, graduated from Chulalongkorn University during the 1930s, and earned a master of arts degree in education from the University of Minnesota in 1952.

stories just as good, with Thai characters in Thai settings. I have already referred to the work of Boonlua above; as for her sister, Bubpha, she became even more famous as "Dok Mai Sot." During its first year, the magazine *Thai kasem* published her first work, a one-act play, and in 1929, it published her first novel, *Satru khong jao lawn*, or *Sàtrùu khɔ̌ɔng câw lɔɔn* (Her enemy).[29] An excerpt from one of her later novels, *Phu dii*, or *phûu dii* (People of quality),[30] generally considered her best work, is included in this anthology.

In 1932, the absolute monarchy was overthrown in a relatively bloodless coup d'état carried out by a mainly civilian, middle-class group of men who had been educated in England, Germany, and France.[31] Thereafter, at least in Bangkok, new ideas about equality and opportunity for women as well as for men were widely discussed, yet the perception of the ideal woman's identifying characteristics changed remarkably little. Wimon, the heroine of *People of Quality*, may be considered an ideal Thai woman of the 1930s: educated and resolute, she is also beautiful and ever mindful of her first duty, which is to serve and protect her family. The reader is led to believe, as the novel ends, that Wimon, having acted quickly and shrewdly to save the family fortune following the unexpected death of her heavily indebted father, may now marry and permanently devote herself to being an ideal wife and mother.

Another woman writer who succeeded during the early period was Ko Surangkanang (the pen name of Kanha Kiangsiri), whose first novel, *Malini*, was serialized in the *Daily Mail* in 1929 when she was only eighteen years old. In 1937 she produced her masterpiece, *Ying khon chua*, or *Yĭng khon chûa* (An evil woman), a novel about a woman who becomes a prostitute not because she is intrinsically bad (the conventional wisdom) but as the result of the injustices and inequities of society.[32] Word got around that the author had spent some time ob-

29. A translation by Ted Strehlow of this novel, titled *A Secret Past*, was published by Southeast Asia Publications, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, in 1992.

30. The Thai title, *Phûu dii*, is virtually untranslatable; *phûu* means "person; people," and *dii* means "good." A literal translation would be "good person" or "good people." In fact, the term signifies good character but also connotes wealth, especially old wealth.

31. A concise account of events before, during, and after the overthrow of the absolute monarchy is given in Benjamin A. Batson, *The End of the Absolute Monarchy in Siam* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984).

32. This novel has been translated into English by David Smyth under the title *The Prostitute* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1994).