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Rewriting English

Cultural Politics of Gender and Class

First published 1985 by Methuen & Co. Ltd

This edition first published 2003

by Routledge

11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Transferred to Digital Printing 2003

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

© 1985, 2003 Janet Batsleer, Tony Davies, Rebecca O'Rourke and
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Printed and bound in Great Britain by

TJI Digital, Padstow, Cornwall

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British
Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-415-29120-8

General editor's preface

It is easy to see that we are living in a time of rapid and radical social change. It is much less easy to grasp the fact that such change will inevitably affect the nature of those disciplines that both reflect our society and help to shape it.

Yet this is nowhere more apparent than in the central field of what may, in general terms, be called literary studies. Here, among large numbers of students at all levels of education, the erosion of the assumptions and presuppositions that support the literary disciplines in their conventional form has proved fundamental. Modes and categories inherited from the past no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by a new generation.

New Accents is intended as a positive response to the initiative offered by such a situation. Each volume in the series will seek to encourage rather than resist the process of change; to stretch rather than reinforce the boundaries that currently define literature and its academic study.

Some important areas of interest immediately present themselves. In various parts of the world, new methods of analysis have been developed whose conclusions reveal the limitations of the Anglo-American outlook we inherit. New concepts of literary forms and modes have been proposed; new notions of the nature of literature itself and of how it communicates are current; new views of literature's role in relation to society

Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to the writing of this book, especially members of the English Studies Group at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies between 1977 and 1980. We would like to thank Michael Denning, Brian Doyle, Hazel Carby, Tony Fry, Michael Green, Michael Lane, Michael Skovmand and Guillermo Sunkel. Special thanks are due to Roger Shannon, who made a considerable contribution to Chapter 4 on masculine romance, and to Myra Connell and Elaine Hobby for their work on women reading which forms an important part of Chapter 7. Janice Winship and Terry Hawkes have provided a good deal of constructive comment.

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flourish. *New Accents* will aim to expound and comment upon the most notable of these.

In the broad field of the study of human communication, more and more emphasis has been placed upon the nature and function of the new electronic media. *New Accents* will try to identify and discuss the challenge these offer to our traditional modes of critical response.

The same interest in communication suggests that the series should also concern itself with those wider anthropological and sociological areas of investigation which have begun to involve scrutiny of the nature of art itself and of its relation to our whole way of life. And this will ultimately require attention to be focused on some of those activities which in our society have hitherto been excluded from the prestigious realms of Culture. The disturbing realignment of values involved and the disconcerting nature of the pressures that work to bring it about both constitute areas that *New Accents* will seek to explore.

Finally, as its title suggests, one aspect of *New Accents* will be firmly located in contemporary approaches to language, and a continuing concern of the series will be to examine the extent to which relevant branches of linguistic studies can illuminate specific literary areas. The volumes with this particular interest will nevertheless presume no prior technical knowledge on the part of their readers, and will aim to rehearse the linguistics appropriate to the matter in hand, rather than to embark on general theoretical matters.

Each volume in the series will attempt an objective exposition of significant developments in its field up to the present as well as an account of its author's own views of the matter. Each will culminate in an informative bibliography as a guide to further study. And, while each will be primarily concerned with matters relevant to its own specific interests, we can hope that a kind of conversation will be heard to develop between them; one whose accents may perhaps suggest the distinctive discourse of the future.

TERENCE HAWKES

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Culture and politics

The idea of this book grew out of an investigation, by a group of students and lecturers at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, into the literature of the 1930s. A simple enough matter, it might be thought, involving no doubt a good deal of reading, a sense of the historical context and pertinence of that reading, the rediscovery or revaluation of one or two neglected writers and a correspondingly revised estimate of some of the better-known ones. And as for the 'thirties', those years seemed, from the Wall Street crash to the Hitler-Stalin pact, from the death of D. H. Lawrence to George Orwell's 'Inside the Whale' and W. H. Auden's self-imposed exile, to define themselves with more than usual clarity as a 'decade', a distinct literary-historical period.

In the event, neither the 'literature' nor the 'thirties' – the two defining terms of that early project – turned out to be so obligingly uncomplicated. For one thing, we came rapidly to recognize that there were already a number of powerful versions of both in circulation. Their convergence around, and vested interest in, the literary pre-eminence of Orwell, Auden, Christopher Isherwood and Graham Greene, and in their various affiliations (for the thirties are, supposedly, the decade of 'commitment' . . .) and disaffiliations (. . . as well as of 'betrayal'), were of a kind to rule out any neutrally proffered additions or amendments. Those versions constituted not just

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one possible list among many of the 'major' writers of the decade, and of its significant political and historical issues and meanings, but a dominant grouping and a preferred narrative, whose force and value depend as much on what they exclude – the 'second-rate', the lowbrow, the popular – as on what they promote to the foreground. In this, we came to realize, they represent a kind of microcosm of the literary and literary-historical canon itself. For when we began to ask how that particular set of writers had been put together and promoted, in book after book, until it had become everybody's common sense about the period, we soon recognized that the 'thirties' themselves, far from being a simple topographical feature of the historical landscape, had similarly and often quite purposefully been *constructed*, at the time and later, as a significant entity, a shaped narrative – heroic or farcical or tragicomic – about what Orwell had called 'the invasion of literature by politics'.

That thirties project, then, set itself the task of compiling, around, behind and against the dominant versions, a more extensive and varied or simply more interesting account of the writing of the pre-war decade. Our aim was not to produce just another would-be 'definitive' reading of the period, but to problematize the very idea of literary periods and in particular to discern some of the forces and tendencies at work in a specific moment in what we came to call the 'literary formation'. This concept, by perhaps misleading analogy with the Althusserian notion of 'social formation', was intended to throw the emphasis away from anecdotal and descriptive accounts of writers and intellectual groupings and on to those relations of relative dominance and subordination, of centrality and marginality, of ideological difference and conflict, that characterize, the production and consumption of literature. By this time too the word 'literature' had become harder and harder to use unself-consciously, since, with its hidden but powerful valuations and exclusions, it was itself clearly one of the forces structuring the historical and ideological ensemble we were attempting to analyse.

It should also be said that difficulties with the idea of 'literature', and a sense that any work that started there would be likely to remain imprisoned within the word's strong magnetic field, had another, more contingent source. This was the

decidedly unsociable relations between cultural studies at the Birmingham Centre, where we were working, and literary criticism, which had, in the writings of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, been one of its progenitors. By the mid-seventies, cultural studies retained few of the affiliations or concerns of Williams's *Culture and Society* or Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy*. In its much firmer engagement with Marxism and, rather differently, with feminism, it had turned to an interest in cultural manifestations and speculative developments that was not by any means hospitable to the idea of literature, as that word would be understood in a university English department.

For these reasons we determined to take our start not from 'literature' but from 'English studies': literary-critical ideologies and discourses, and their institutional locations and forms of power. We set out to treat these not as just another academic object of study requiring some anodyne historical sociology of literary tastes and attitudes, but as a problem and a challenge, calling for criticism and analysis of a sharper and more contestatory kind. Work of this sort is often described as 'contextual', and to the extent that it aims to break down the academic segregation and conceptual isolation of literature, the notion of 'context' is serviceable. But it can slide too easily into implicitly conceding the pre-eminence and assumed value of texts – not any old texts either, but *the* texts, the canon, the great tradition safely installed in the literature syllabus and regularly reconsecrated in the annual round of published criticism. The study of the thirties, though, had already taken us into areas and kinds of writing whose interest and significance lay far from any valuation of literary 'quality': to mass-market genres and 'middlebrow' novelists, to women's writing, to working-class fiction, as well as to a wider investigation of those institutions – such as schooling, publishing and broadcasting – whose active role in determining the meaning and value of writing and reading makes any treatment of them as inertly 'contextual' absurdly inadequate.¹

These issues and problems have over the years remained central to our interests, and some of them are represented in the pages that follow. They are there in the critique of literature in education; in the account of the last great period, at least until

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the recent resurgence of worker-writer organizations, of working-class education and literature in the twenties and thirties; in the studies of popular literature, particularly as it is written and read by women; and in investigations of the new forms and practices of reading and writing associated with the women's liberation movement. At the same time, while the book (like the thirties project before it) moves beyond curricular literature and the discourses of English studies to consider practices of reading and writing that are largely excluded by the institutions of literary education and criticism, it also raises questions about those exclusions and those institutions which are likely to be central to any attempt to transform the study of English itself.

To the extent that the interests generated by the thirties project have developed and changed, they have also diverged. The following chapters, though historically grounded in themselves, range over a much wider period. In part this reflects a realization that forms of writing and practices of reading can properly be understood only in terms of their own relatively independent histories, and the uneven relations between them. But the move away from a more narrowly defined historical study is also prompted by an overriding concern for the cultural politics of the present moment, and by a conviction that the significance of history lies – though in no simply illustrative or exemplary way – in its importance for an understanding of the present.

The unity of the chapters that follow, then, is not of a conventional type. Each chapter is relatively discrete. Since they are no longer solely about the thirties, nor any longer concerned exclusively with the dominant discourse of English studies, their coherence now derives rather from a common politics, feminist and socialist, and from a shared form and habit of argument, both of which constitute an attempt to grasp the intricate and contradictory ways in which cultural processes and their products are inextricably enmeshed in the historical structures and power relations of class societies. This involves a recognition that, while images, narratives, meanings, the whole semiotic repertoire of a society, can never 'belong' in some absolute and unchanging sense to a single class, group or sex, slavishly encoding and reproducing their interests and values, neither can they, so long as they remain 'live' and active, escape

what the Russian Marxist Vološinov, writing of language, called the 'multi-accentuality' of social conflict and inequality (Vološinov 1973, ch. 2). Thus even activities as apparently simple and fundamental as reading and writing are, in capitalist society, at one and the same time forms of regulation and exploitation *and* potential modes of resistance, celebration and solidarity. Every act of writing and reading, however apparently servile or mutinous, is marked by this double movement, echoing the cry of Caliban:

You taught me language; and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse.

Our argument has tried to follow and enact this contradictory unity, leaning sometimes, in stressing the dominative aspects of capitalist patriarchy, to the critical mode; sometimes, in recording the persistent inventiveness with which people have resisted or evaded or appropriated its pressures, to the affirmative and celebratory. But generally, as in the exploration of mass-produced popular narratives, we attempt to hold a kind of contradictory median point, like those stories themselves, allowing a proper weight both to the potent representation of 'things as they are' and to the insurgent imagination of things as they might be.

We have called this a shared form of argument; and it is true that we have tried to find a way of writing that avoids as far as possible the twin temptations that beset cultural analysis on the left – moralistic denunciation and vacuous populist enthusiasm. But this is not really an intellectual or stylistic issue at all. It is a political one: how to acknowledge and comprehend the tremendous capacity of patriarchal and capitalist institutions to regenerate themselves not only in their material foundations and structures but in the hearts and minds of people, while never losing sight or despairing of the power of popular organization and struggle to resist and transform them. This represents an immediate and familiar dilemma for anyone who works (as in different ways all the authors of this book do) in the 'cultural apparatuses' of the state: education, community work, regional arts, and the like. In critical periods like the present, socialists and feminists in these institutions can find themselves seemingly defending the indefensible: not only their own

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comparatively privileged and sometimes quite powerful jobs, but entire institutions whose evident purpose and effect, thrown into even sharper relief by the imposed priorities of economic necessity and ideological discipline, is the reproduction of major forms of cultural privilege and social power. These ambiguities can be seen, for example, in higher education, where the benevolent paternalism of the 'Robbins principle' has given way to the unambiguous class interest of selective access and economic functionalism. This has obliged socialists to campaign for the restoration of a liberal ideology and practice of education with which they are likely to find themselves profoundly at variance, in a situation in which to argue strongly for socialist alternatives is likely to be seen as both divisive and futile. The fight over state funding for the arts, at a time when the argument is no longer about distribution and definition but about stark survival, offers another instance: what feminist or socialist would wish, in other circumstances, to defend the assumptions, the policies, the very existence of the Arts Council of Great Britain?

These contradictions and ambiguities, which are far more significant, interesting and painful than any supposed 'crisis in English studies', have emerged with increasing clarity and urgency over the period in which the book has been put together. They have compelled us to hope that it will be taken as a contribution, not, certainly, to literary criticism, nor even to cultural studies in the academic sense, but rather to a still undeveloped but possible and very necessary cultural politics of reading and writing. 'Cultural politics' is a concept, or rather a phrase, that has enjoyed a certain vogue in recent years, a vogue not always accompanied by any corresponding clarity of definition. Of course, what matters in the end is not whether cultural politics can be 'defined' (a question of lexicographic interest, at most), but whether it is a serviceable and productive notion, marking out an identifiable and feasible agenda of struggle, and suggesting ways of tackling it. But perhaps a brief consideration of the meanings of the phrase may throw some light on those questions too.

First, 'cultural politics' often seems to imply a contrast with some other kind of politics, usually 'real politics': that is, electoral and party politics, the politics of material need and

provision, of insurrection and armed struggle, of the Politburo and the art of the possible. No priorities are necessarily implied, but in the dominant tradition cultural politics, if it has been recognized at all, has been firmly subordinated to the 'real thing'. This may be justified in the name of theoretical priority or of tactical necessity, or of both; rather in the manner of Brecht's sardonic phrase in *The Threepenny Opera*: 'grub first, ethics later'. In any case, it rests on a sharp conceptual division between politics and culture. This is often hard to sustain in the face of actual instances, and it certainly assumes a constricted and indeed conventional (i.e. bourgeois) notion of both culture and politics which the left might have been expected to challenge. None the less it remains characteristic of the Labour Party and the labour movement, as of British life in general, that it represents culture – even or especially in its narrow sense of books, theatre, music, entertainment – as having little or nothing to do with the serious business of politics and practical life. This separation is deeply rooted in the national mentality, and has had the result not only of depoliticizing culture but also, with equally impoverishing results, of 'deculturalizing' politics. Removing politics from the semiotic domain of signs, images and meanings, it segregates it from the lives and interests of 'ordinary people', who are in turn induced to accept the representation of themselves as incapable of, and bored by, political reflection and action.

A broader definition of culture, understood as a whole 'way of life' or 'way of struggle', with a consequent shift and expansion of the meaning of politics, has been a notable feature of 'New Left' thinking since the sixties. One example is provided by the libertarian and situationist initiatives of the later sixties, which actively refused both bourgeois and economic Marxist definitions of politics and announced the irruption of culture, understood both as creativity and as a redeemed and unalienated everyday life, into the political domain. A more enduring and incalculably more significant instance has been the practical and theoretical challenge offered in recent years by the women's liberation movement. There too the traditional emphasis of male political activists on agendas, programmes and formalities of organization has been met by an insistence on the permanently and radically political character of everyday experience

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and private life, expressed in the phrase 'the personal is political'.

These differing senses of 'culture' and 'politics' ought not to be allowed to become programmatically absolute. It is worth remembering that, although the phrase 'cultural politics' is more likely to be encountered on the left, the dominant order, in its political institutions and state apparatuses, knows perfectly well what it means and why it matters. Indeed, the politics of symbols, subjectivities and meanings has proved an important component in the popular success of the new conservatism, with, for example, its use of spectacle as in the Falklands' War, its stress on individualism and authoritarianism and its redefinition of the enemy within. It may be that the cultural politics of the right will be making the running and defining the issues for the next few years at least. In these circumstances it will be as well to retain a degree of inventiveness and flexibility; indeed, it may even be necessary, on occasion, to leave 'culture' where it is and to concede the tactical (though never the absolute) priority of politics, old-style. (The authors of this book are, in fact, all active in politics, in this sense.) But it will always be important, too, to keep other senses, other grounds and resources of struggle, other imaginations of politics, alive and available.

Against this background, three broad areas of cultural-political practice might be outlined. In each, both culture and politics are given different contents and inflections, separately and together, suggesting the need not for some centralized 'programme' but for a great variety of different kinds of organization and strategy.

First, there is the struggle around the political and commercial organization of culture, in a fairly traditional sense: education, the arts, the sites and agencies of recreation and leisure.

Second, there is the issue of the cultural dimensions of politics: the language, symbolism and forms of representation of the political sphere. There are people on the left who cannot see a problem here and who believe that this has nothing to do with politics or vice versa. The cultural dimension of politics involves more than a mass-circulation labour movement tabloid. It must engage with its own sexism and racism, which among other things allow some activists to see nothing incongruous or

problematic in urging British voters, more than half of them women, to 'ditch the bitch'.

Third, there is the battle over and for the political dimensions of culture, in its broadest sense. This is the most difficult as well as perhaps the most important area of cultural-political struggle. The difficulty is suggested by the fact that, with the important exception of the women's liberation movement, oppositional thinking about cultural politics, in this sense, has rarely advanced much beyond the hopeful incantation of a 'Gramscian' litany – hegemony, common sense, organic intellectuals, and the like.² Its practice, on the other hand, has been widespread in more or less disconnected and uncoordinated ways since the late sixties. It can be found in movements like 'Rock against Racism', in the anti-apartheid movement's interventions in and redefinitions of the politics of sport, in radical community and youth work, in the analysis of racism and political partisanship in seemingly neutral or innocuous things like television sitcoms and news bulletins. But all these, important and suggestive as they have been, have remained marginal to the labour movement, the Labour Party and the political consciousness of most people. They have been unable, thus far, to shift or extend the dominant meanings.

This is in part a problem of 'Englishness'. Those who re-experience their subjugation daily, at home, at work, in the street, know what cultural politics is, though few of them might call it that. Many Irish, Scots and Welsh know well enough that politics is a question of language, consciousness, identity, history. Black people understand that cultural struggle is no merely 'theoretical' issue. Women appreciate the hegemony of the pronoun and the politics of the joke. But the ruling culture of Englishness – white, male and (whatever its electoral habits) conservative – remains profoundly mistrustful of politics, as of culture, and resistant to its infiltration into everyday life. The disabling separation that makes 'cultural politics' such an intractable notion reflects the weakness and conservatism of our tradition, such as it is, of popular sovereignty. It reminds us that the British labour movement has never had to learn at first hand the terrible lessons of continental fascism: that capitalism is strong and cunning even in its moments of greatest weakness, and that its strength lies not only in its factories, armies and

parliaments but in the rhythms and textures of culture, consciousness and everyday life.

This Englishness has left its mark on all of us. Non-English readers may feel at times, in the pages that follow, the constriction and airlessness of a certain parochialism, a preoccupation with figures and issues that seem, under a different sky, less momentous than we would make them. They should remind themselves that we are living out the dotage of an imperial culture, and that our dreams are peopled by ghosts. But from that culture we have inherited other habits too, towards which no indulgence can be extended; for the 'common politics' which, we have suggested, gives some kind of coherence to the cultural analyses and critiques that follow brings with it a uniformity of a more negative kind: its virtual blindness to questions of race. We have tried to keep in mind at every turn the interlocking relations of gender and class, but have failed to sustain any but the most transient and superficial recognition of a set of determinations every bit as basic and powerful, a structure of exploitation and a history of resistance of especially compelling relevance to political and cultural struggle in contemporary Britain. The book is, by that token, implicitly and actually *racist*, to the extent that it tacitly perpetuates and confirms the historical, cultural and political invisibility of black Britons. To call racism of this kind 'institutional' rather than intentionally willed may explain but can hardly redeem it. Capitalism and patriarchy are 'institutional', in this sense: pervasive, taken for granted, organic to the common sense of the dominant culture. If the book's aim is to contribute to the analysis and, thereby, to the transformation of the institutions of cultural power, it must also be acknowledged, as one of its many contradictions, that in this respect it speaks from and serves to reinforce those very institutions. If we invoke the curse of Caliban, we cannot prevent it falling on our own heads too.

These contradictions, ambiguities and absences, acknowledged and unacknowledged, define the ground of cultural struggle. This involves the re-accentuation of culture and the relocation of cultural practice within a collective social life. The scale, as well as the vagueness, of the project may serve as a reminder that it will take a long time and a long struggle before we can say that words like 'culture', 'politics', even 'literature',