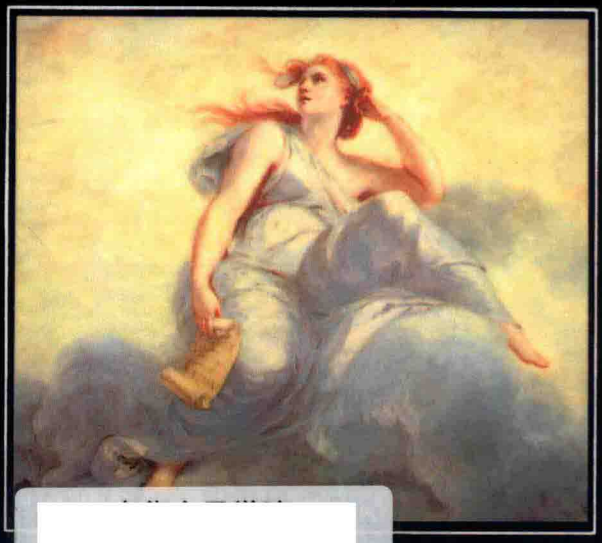
THE BUCKNELL LECTURES IN LITERARY THEORY

Feminist Revision and the Bible



Alicia Suskin Ostriker

Feminist Revision and the Bible

Alicia Suskin Ostriker

BLACKWELL
Oxford UK & Cambridge USA

First published 1993

Blackwell Publishers
238 Main Street, Suite 501
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142
USA

108 Cowley Road
Oxford OX4 1JF
UK

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 0–631–18797–9 — 0–631–18798–7 (pbk.)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

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

Typeset in 11 on 13 pt Plantin
by Pure Tech Corporation, Pondicherry, India
Printed in Great Britain by Biddles Ltd, Guildford
This book is printed on acid-free paper

Feminist Revision and the Bible

THE BUCKNELL LECTURES IN LITERARY THEORY
General Editors: Michael Payne and Harold Schweizer

The lectures in this series explore some of the fundamental changes in literary studies that have occurred during the past thirty years in response to new work in feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction. They assess the impact of these changes and examine specific texts in the light of this new work. Each volume in the series includes a critical assessment of the lecturer's own publications, an interview, and a comprehensive bibliography.

1	Frank Kermode	*Poetry, Narrative, History*
2	Terry Eagleton	*The Significance of Theory*
3	Toril Moi	*Feminist Theory and Simone de Beauvoir*
4	J. Hillis Miller	*Hawthorne and History*
5	Christopher Norris	*Spinoza and the Origins of Modern Critical Theory*
6	Denis Donoghue	*The Pure Good of Theory*
7	Alicia Suskin Ostriker	*Feminist Revision and the Bible*

Preface

Fundamental and far-reaching changes in literary studies, often compared to paradigmatic shifts in the sciences, have been taking place during the last thirty years. These changes have included enlarging the literary canon not only to include novels, poems, and plays by writers whose race, gender, or nationality had marginalized their work but also to include texts by philosophers, psychoanalysts, historians, anthropologists, social and religious thinkers, who previously were studied by critics merely as 'background'. The stance of the critic and student of literature is also now more in question than ever before. In 1951 it was possible for Cleanth Brooks to declare with confidence that the critic's job was to describe and evaluate literary objects, implying the relevance for criticism of the model of scientific objectivity while leaving unasked questions concerning significant issues in scientific theory, such as complementarity, indeterminacy, and the use of metaphor. Now the possibility of value-free skepticism is itself in doubt as many feminist, Marxist, and psychoanalytic theorists have stressed the inescapability of ideology and the consequent obligation of teachers and students of literature to declare their political, axiological, and aesthetic positions in order to make those positions conscious and available for examination. Such expansion

and deepening of literary studies has, for many critics, revitalized their field.

Those for whom the theoretical revolution has been regenerative would readily echo, and apply to criticism, Lacan's call to revitalize psychoanalysis: 'I consider it to be an urgent task to disengage from concepts that are being deadened by routine use the meaning that they regain both from a re-examination of their history and from a reflexion on their subjective foundations. That, no doubt, is the teacher's prime function.'

Many practising writers and teachers of literature, however, see recent developments in literary theory as dangerous and anti-humanistic. They would insist that displacement of the centrality of the word, claims for the 'death of the author', emphasis upon gaps and incapacities in language, and indiscriminate opening of the canon threaten to marginalize literature itself. In this view the advance of theory is possible only because of literature's retreat in the face of aggressive moves by Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis. Furthermore, at a time of militant conservativism and the dominance of corporate values in America and Europe, literary theory threatens to diminish further the declining audience for literature and criticism. Theoretical books are difficult to read; they usually assume that their readers possess knowledge that few have who have received a traditional literary education; they often require massive reassessments of language, meaning, and the world; they seem to draw their life from suspect branches of other disciplines: professional philosophers usually avoid Derrida; psychoanalysts dismiss Freud as unscientific; Lacan was excommunicated even by the International Psycho-Analytical Association.

The volumes in this series record part of the attempt at Bucknell University to sustain conversation about changes in literary studies, the impact of those changes on literary art, and the significance of literary theory for

the humanities and human sciences. A generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has made possible a five-year series of visiting lectureships by internationally known participants in the reshaping of literary studies. Each volume includes a comprehensive introduction to the published work of the lecturer, the two Bucknell Lectures, an interview, and a comprehensive bibliography.

Acknowledgements

Grateful acknowledgement is made for permission to reprint from the following previously published material: 'if i stand in my window', 'good friday', and 'to a dark moses' copyright © 1987 by Lucille Clifton. Reprinted from *good woman: poems and a memoir 1969–1980* by Lucille Clifton with the permission of BOA Editions, Ltd, 92 Park Avenue, Brockport, NY, 14420; from 'the making of poems' and 'holy night' in *two-headed woman* by Lucille Clifton, copyright © 1980 by Lucille Clifton, reprinted by permission of Curtis Brown, Ltd., from *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* edited by Thomas H. Johnson. Copyright 1929 by Martha Dickinson Bianchi; Copyright © renewed 1957 by Mary L. Hampson. Reprinted by permission of Little, Brown and Company; Dickinson poems also reprinted by permission of the publishers and the Trustees of Amherst College from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Thomas H. Johnson, ed., Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Copyright © 1951, 1955, 1983 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College; from *H. D. Collected Poems: 1912–1944*, copyright © 1982 by the Estate of Hilda Doolittle. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp. and Carcanet Press. 'Goblin Market' from *The Poetical*

Works of Christina G. Rossetti (New York: Macmillan, 1924), and 'Adam's Curse' from *The Poems of W. B. Yeats: A New Edition*, edited by Richard J. Finneran (New York: Macmillan, 1983). 'Myth' by Muriel Rukeyser from *Out of Silence*, 1992, Tri-Quarterly Books, Evanston IL © William L. Rukeyser.

Contents

Introduction

Alicia Ostriker, like many contemporary American feminists, began her critical work with formal studies of male writers. Starting with *Vision and Verse in William Blake* (1965), a book-length examination of Blake's metrical techniques, she went on to write several articles on prosody in other male poets – Herbert, Tennyson, Wyatt and Surrey. The rebellious Blake, with what she terms his 'systematic detestation of the works and ways of patriarchal culture', provided an auspicious beginning (RE, p. 73). Many of the qualities that Ostriker finds later in women's poetry she found first in Blake – revisionary mythmaking, the embracing of contraries, the effort to transform human life, 'the interpenetration of the personal and the political', and the 'use of humor as a weapon against the sanctimonious' (RE, pp. 71, 83). In analyzing Blake's prosody, a thorny subject avoided by most Blake scholars, Ostriker connects Blake's prosodic choices to his politics, portraying his development as a search for 'liberated modes of verse' (*VV*, p. 6).

The interests of her early period continue into the present. Her more recent work on Blake includes the major project of editing the Penguin edition of *William Blake: The Complete Poems* (1977) as well as an influential essay on Blake and sexuality. She has also maintained her interest in technical questions, most likely

because she is a working poet – one in a procession of feminist poet-critics such as Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker, Sandra Gilbert, and Rachel Blau DuPlessis. In fact, her needs as a woman artist first drew her to the poetry of other women whose work inspired her to make the traditional shift into a feminist critic's second stage, working on the art of women.

The first series of Alicia Ostriker's essays on American women poets was collected in *Writing Like a Woman* (1983). Besides discussions of H. D., Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, May Swenson, and Adrienne Rich, the volume contains two theoretical/personal essays on women and writing. Although she treats each of these poets separately, she already considers them part of a new literary movement, a renaissance of women that she chronicles in her next volume, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1986).

These studies place her solidly in a major school of American feminist criticism – 'gynocritics' – named by Elaine Showalter, whose 1984–5 definition calls it a historically oriented criticism that 'looks at women's writing as it has actually occurred and tries to define its specific characteristics of language, genre, and literary influence, within a cultural network that includes variables of race, class, and nationality'.[1] According to Josephine Donovan, gynocritics is rooted in cultural feminism, a consideration of women's customs, epistemology, aesthetics and ethics.[2] Gynocritics has helped reintroduce history and politics into criticism. The material fact that many American feminist literary critics, Ostriker included, teach English in universities has rooted gynocritics in their political practice of reforming the university curriculum and in their work of teaching the predominantly female students in English studies.

Ostriker's gynocritical project is American women's poetry since 1960, a body of work she sees as 'a collec-

tive endeavor to redefine "woman" and "woman poet" ' (*SL*, p. 240). Believing that the core of a woman's art movement is a concern with what it means to be a woman, she writes mostly about poets who deal courageously with the political 'realities' of women's lives. Working to illuminate the place of women writers involves Ostriker, as it does most feminists, in what she calls in the present volume a 'hermeneutic of desire'. 'First I see what I love', she explains, 'then I try to understand it. . . . I like the word "love" better than the word "evaluate" ' (DDP, p. 584). From those whose affection for the word 'evaluate' exceeds Ostriker's, of course, such a method provokes calls for more 'rigor'.[3]

Her critical strategy is to examine American women poets in both traditional and radical terms. Such an approach arises quite naturally from the American feminist literary critic's role as an insider/outsider whose training in schools of criticism previous to feminism, Jane Gallop points out, produces double loyalities – to feminism and to literary criticism, to politics and to literature, to practice and to theory, to women and to men, to social considerations and to formalism.[4]

Accordingly, many of the qualities Ostriker discovers in women poets are familiar from androcentric criticism – innovation, philosophy, largeness, revisionary mythmaking, engagement with modern problems of alienation, the invention of poetic forms to convey new insights. Demanding for these poets a place in the traditional male literary history by claiming that they form a coherent literary movement, she explicitly legitimates their 'polemical' and 'necessarily adversarial' stance by a comparison with romanticism and modernism, literary movements which also had their polemical centers (*SL*, pp. 7, 239). She further justifies the feminist politics of contemporary women poets with a venerable romantic claim, reminding us, in 'Dancing at the Devil's Party: Some Notes on Politics and Poetry', of the Blakean

dictum that 'the true poet (the good poet) is necessarily the partisan of energy, rebellion, and desire, and is opposed to passivity, obedience, and the authority of reason, laws, and institutions' (DDP, p. 580). Of course, the application of such standard claims to the art of women is the reverse of orthodox.

Simultaneously, Ostriker finds in women's poetry motifs that have been redefined and revalued by feminism – the divided self, the body, anger, desire, and social concern. Pursuing the central gynocritical assumption that women's lives are sources of knowledge, she sees these motifs as grounded not in male tradition but in female experience.

Several of her views on women's poetry involve her in current critical controversies. Her conception of women's revisionary mythmaking embroils her in the current question of women's relationship to language. Like myth critics before her, Ostriker sees myths as 'the sanctuaries of language where our meanings for "male" and "female" are stored'. Therefore, revisionist mythmaking is the 'major strategy' whereby women writers 'subvert and overcome' the ' "oppressor's language" which denies them access to authoritative expression' (*SL*, p. 11). Rejecting a model of language as monolithically resistant to female expression, Ostriker asserts that 'semantically significant language is . . . only relatively and with many loopholes, masculine' (CCK, p. 133). Or else, she asks, 'How is it that women writers in our time have produced – in fiction, poetry, and drama, in and through a symbolic system that supposedly excludes the female and a set of genres that are supposedly dominated by masculinity – a substantial body of subversive and transformative work which redefines what we must mean by the terms *woman* and *literature*?' (CCK, p. 132).

Further critical debates rage around the issue of women's experience. Ostriker's vision of women poets

writing from the lived experience of the material body could be read as perilously close to assigning women their old place in the body/mind dichotomy of patriarchal thought, but, for Ostriker, women's poetry heals this division: women 'represent the body as at one with the mind, an intelligently creative force' (*SL*, p. 197) – 'the gynocentric vision is not that the Logos condescends to incarnate itself, but that Flesh becomes Word' (*SL*, p. 199).

The gynocritical emphasis on experience entails a controversial interest in the lives of women poets. 'Books', says Nina Auerbach, 'are inseparable from the private experiences that authorized them'.[5] In *Writing Like A Woman* especially, Ostriker emphasizes biography, demonstrating how a woman poet's experience of leading a gender-defined life gives rise to the insights that inform her poetry. For Ostriker and other American feminists, the author is anything but dead.

American feminist insistence on the woman author and on women's experience has been attacked as naive empiricism, bourgeois individualism, and essentialism, but it does assert two major political points: that lived relations of domination give rise to political insights and that a revolution, in criticism and elsewhere, has to resist the oppression of a subject, an at-least-temporarily stable historical entity. The founding assumption of contemporary American feminist theory and practice is that the personal is the political. Donna Haraway states the central difficulty for feminists of dissolving the self: 'What kind of politics could embrace partial, contradictory, permanently unclosed constructions of personal and collective selves and still be faithful, effective – and, ironically, socialist feminist?'[6] In Ostriker's case, although she sees the woman poet as expressing 'self', this self is anything but classically unitary or romantically divided into a 'true' and 'false' self. She is at pains to demonstrate in *Stealing the Language* that women poets write

of multiple selves constructed in response to their experiences, selves which 'challenge the validity of the I' (*SL*, p. 237).

A corollary of Ostriker's trust in experience is her distrust of literary theory – seemingly a strange position for a theorist, but one shared with many American feminists who suspect that much literary theory functions to maintain the interpretive hegemony of a male elite and may even be, in Elaine Showalter's words, a 'defensive reaction against the feminization of the profession'.[7] Nina Baym states this point of view succinctly: 'Not truth, but power, is the issue.'[8] American feminists often question the politics of theories not derived from the women's movement, especially theories that ignore gender or, in the case of some psychoanalytic theories, appear to reduce women to the non-verbal. As Ostriker ironically puts it, 'were I a good postmodernist I might learn from the master theoreticians of our time, or from their female disciples, that "woman" theoretically does not exist, that "she" is necessarily absence, lack' (RE, p. 67).

Ostriker claims that 'our critical discourse grows ever less capable of dealing with visionary artists as it grows ever more infatuated with pseudo-scientific postures and jargons' (RE, p. 84). In her view, theory often distorts reading because it is too narrowly interested in its own notions and in its own power over the reading situation. Out of respect for women, their poetry, and the experience from which it arises, she prefers 'to read by the light that poems themselves emit, rather than by the fixed beam of one or another theory which might shine where a poem is not and leave in darkness the place where it is' (*SL*, p. 13). Yet, while Ostriker deplores theory's interference in her 'personal responses', she clearly does not believe that reading is an innocent transaction: she realizes that personal responses have 'a political dimension', that 'we love what is on our side', and that there are no 'literary standards without ideological implica-

tions' (DDP, pp. 583–4). Thus, insisting that schemata-free reading is impossible, she seems simply to be cautioning against what she feels to be the current Urizenic focus on critical method at the expense of the reader, the poet, and the poem.

Distrust of theory is closely related to Ostriker's cultivation of a metaphoric and readable prose style. ' "No ideas but in metaphors" might be a useful rule of thumb for poets and critics', she suggests, 'especially when we engage in ideological discourse, where words so easily collapse into formulaic wallpaper. A metaphor gives us at least a fighting chance of saying something real' (DDP, p. 580). Accordingly, her critical prose is illuminated by eloquent figures such as 'the fiery muck of our bodies like oil spills burning' (*WW*, p. 146). Such a style, at once vivid and lucid, helps to make her prose accessible, a trait many American feminists value because of the duty they feel to return their work to a wide audience of women. As Patricia Hill Collins explains, 'I could not write a book about Black women's ideas that the vast majority of African-American women could not read and understand.'[9]

Ostriker's preference for the experiential and metaphoric over the abstract, and for revisionary mythmaking over against androcentric tradition, brings her to her third stage as a feminist critic – writing about Judaism and culture – a stage that reflects recent feminist critical interest in exploring difference especially through one's personal heritage. Her major work in progress during this period has been a series of critical rewritings of biblical narratives, at once mythical revision and cultural analysis, entitled *The Nakedness of the Fathers*.[10] Rethinking what she refers to as 'the founding text of western patriarchy' (*NF*, Preface), she has become 'one of those women who locate themselves deliberately at the intersection of literature, religion, and politics, and see their