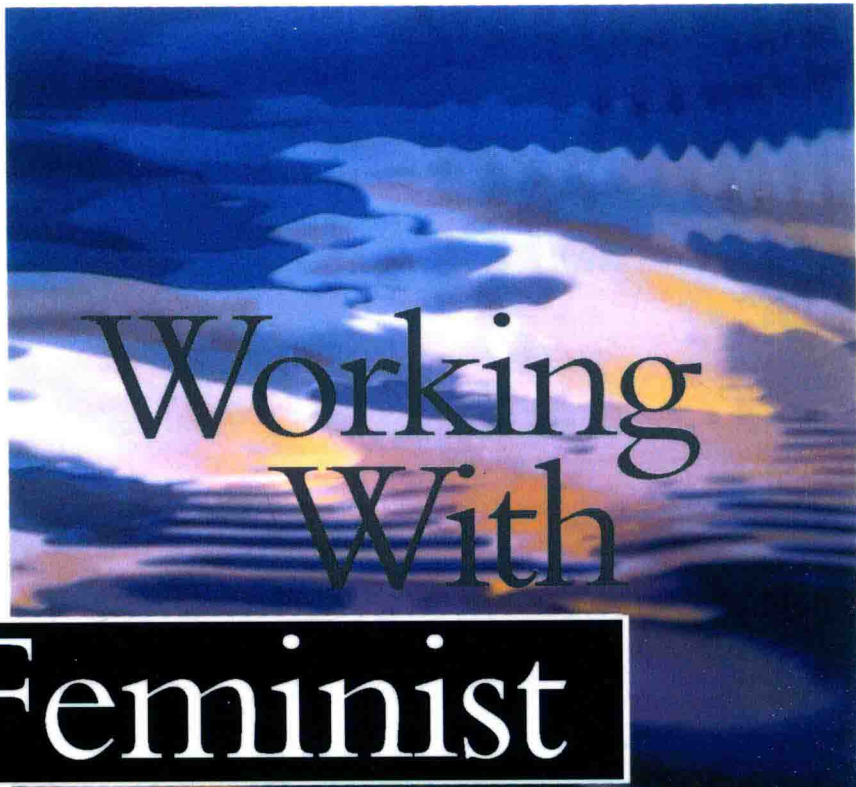


Mary Eagleton



Working
With

Feminist

Criticism

*Working
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Criticism*

Mary
Eagleton

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Introduction

Aims of the book

If you have recently entered higher education to study literature, or women's studies, or cultural studies, if you are planning to do so, or if you have an interest in how critical debates have developed in recent years, then at some stage you will confront the significant body of materials produced in the last thirty years in feminist literary criticism – an encounter which I hope you undertake with the appropriate mixture of excitement and trepidation. Engaging with feminist literary criticism is a large project but, at the same time, endlessly challenging. The aim of this book is to help with the process in a variety of ways.

In 1973 French critic, Roland Barthes published a book about reading called *The Pleasure of the Text*. So let us start with the idea of pleasure – pleasure in the intellectual provocation of the ideas you will find in feminist criticism and, sometimes, pleasure in the recognition of a kindred spirit, a writer saying just what you have always thought or just what you wanted to hear. I believe that the ideas discussed in this book are important to literature, important to women's lives and important to men who care about women's lives. I hope you experience a similar sense of immediacy and relevance.

The book does not intend to be exhaustive. You will find here only a fraction of what is available, lined on acres of bookshelves. But what the book should do is introduce you to some of the central ideas and approaches that have preoccupied feminist critics. As a teacher of this material I feel I am always running to stand still, guiltily aware of what I have failed to read. My students tell me how overwhelmed they can feel by the quantity and, sometimes, the difficulty of the criticism. This book provides you with, at least, a starting point.

I am trying to encourage an active involvement with the material in the belief that the more one does the more one understands. Thus, in each section, I ask you to find out, to think, to review, to jot down, to compare, to evaluate, to research, to discuss ... There is a temptation to avoid following any of these requests and simply deduce where the process is leading. I ask you to resist such a temptation if you can since by taking a full part in the process you will learn more and you will become increasingly at ease with the concepts.

I hope the book will function also as a resource. I include many extracts from different critics and writers and I trust that at least some of them will intrigue you sufficiently to want to discover more about the author's work. The sections contain advice for further projects and reading, so once you feel confident about the basics, you can move on to other materials. I like to think that the book will

be a useful adjunct to your future work in feminist criticism, a convenient source to which you can return for names, titles, ideas, quotations.

Your responses

For those of you who are new to higher education or returning to academic work after a break of some years, following the activities and guidelines given in each section should help in developing the analytical and research skills you will need also in other areas of study. Later in this Introduction I list some of the kinds of reference material you will find useful. In the sections themselves you will encounter two kinds of question:

- those which ask you to think widely, laterally, intuitively
- those which ask you to organize, systematize, focus.

Both kinds of question are essential to any research process: the first stimulates a diverse and creative response to ideas; the second helps you to direct the heterogeneous response for the purpose of producing an essay, a seminar paper, a presentation. Don't feel that you have to conjure up instantly profound comments. To remind yourself of the obvious is a handy way of getting clear in your mind the basics of the debate. Secondly, try not to censor yourself. Those thoughts we dismiss as 'wrong', 'probably irrelevant', 'off the wall' are often the start of genuine perceptions. Be attentive to your own responses, nurture them; don't short-change them in your haste to get to the nearest critic or 'authority'.

If you look to this book for answers then you will be disappointed. There are few correct answers in feminist criticism – or, indeed, in any other form of criticism. Obviously it is better to make clear that *Pride and Prejudice* was written by Jane Austen rather than Barry Manilow but, once one gets beyond that baseline, there is a plurality of critiques, interpretations, ways of reading. This is not to say, however, that every opinion is as valid as every other. There are ways in which one can illustrate that George Eliot's use of imagery is more complex than Barbara Cartland's and fans of Miss Cartland will just have to eat humble pie. But quite how the reader interprets George Eliot's imagery seems to me to be open to long-term debate. Thus, I would encourage you to pursue questions beyond your initial thoughts to further, more perceptive analysis; your first response is important but, if you keep working on the material, you will find other responses to add to that first one.

Although there are no neat answers, I do provide hints as to productive avenues, or I start a response and ask you to continue, or I begin a checklist of points and ask you to complete it, or I give my response and then ask you to comment on it or to give yours. This is because I recognize that students who feel unsure of their capabilities or who are coming new to the area value guidance. On the other hand, if you want to experiment freely, then redefine the guidelines in ways that suit you.

Dealing with difficulty

My own students have been the enthusiastic, willing and, occasionally, less than willing experimenters with this material over many years and their responses and comments have carefully guided me. In one area, though, I have to admit that I have not completely followed their advice, in that I have not removed from the

text all the bits which they told me were ‘difficult’, ‘inaccessible’, ‘obscure’. This is not because of any particular malice on my part and I have, indeed, tried to make the text as lucid as possible. However, not only is it beyond my capabilities to make this text transparently clear for every reader, it is also not my desire so to do. I do not want to control all possible meanings; I want to leave spaces for readers to produce their own – sometimes novel, sometimes idiosyncratic – interpretations. The result is that, from time to time, the reader has to struggle with difficult materials. This will mean that you, like me, will repeatedly return to material, sometimes over a long period, to glean what it has to say. It will mean that you, like me, will have to admit, on occasions, that you cannot make sense of something, or cannot at the moment. The main point is not to be put off by difficulty, not to see it as a sign of your ‘failure’. It isn’t. Trying to find your own way through difficult material is an important aspect of intellectual development; it is part of what study is about. Equally, don’t dismiss all difficult material as pretentious nonsense. Sometimes it may be that, but it can also be a writer trying to express complex and subtle ideas or a writer experimenting with a new approach. You have to work with the author to elucidate those ideas.

How can one ‘work with the author’? If you are faced with material which you find hard to understand, try the following strategies:

- List what seem to you some of the important points and then amplify each one in your own words.
- Select points with which you agree, disagree, or about which you are unsure. Explain why in each case.
- Write a synopsis of the argument as far as you can take it.
- Select an aspect that interests you and produce a list of questions that you would like answered about that aspect.
- Can you think of other material (critical, imaginative or from other cultural forms) that in some way – maybe obliquely – connects with the passage you are studying? Have you come across some aspects of the argument elsewhere? If so, follow up your references and compare what is being said.
- Are there phrases, sentences, structures in the writing, tones, rhythms which intrigue you or strike you? Are there terms you don’t understand which you need to look up in a dictionary or a glossary of literary concepts?
- Try taking issue with the parts of the argument you understand; give a contrary view or dispute the terms or premises.
- As always, if you can share notes with a friend, your understanding will be greatly increased.

Following these and similar strategies does not mean that all will be laid bare as a consequence but they will give you a way in to a text which, at first, may have appeared mystifying.

Ways of reading the book

My intention is that the book is both structured and open, though I realize that I

risk missing both goals in trying to do the impossible. Each section has defined structure. There is an introduction which outlines the aims of the section; my observations on material are marked with a bullet, thus: ●; points which demand a response on your part are indicated by ►. Sections conclude with a reading list of all the texts mentioned in the section and other related material (full publication details are given in the list of works at the end of the book).

There is also a rough logic to the sequence of the sections:

- Since the ability to take up a place in public discourse is the foundation of all women's writing, the first section considers women's relation to both speech and silence, while the second section also considers language by focusing on the problems of definition. The openness of feminism to investigating and re-defining its terminology is notable throughout this text; many terms have layers of meanings and associations.
- Sections 3–5 consider the position of the woman author and the development of a tradition of women's writing.
- Sections 6 and 7 look at issues of genre and literary form and how they might relate to gender and the field of possibilities for the woman writer.
- Sections 8–10 examine publishing, strategies for reading and the practices of feminist criticism, in other words – what happens to the text once it leaves the desk of the woman author.
- Sections 11–15 concentrate on some of the key theoretical problems that have preoccupied feminist writers and literary critics.
- The final sections are a Conclusion, indicating ways forward for future study, and a list of all the texts that have been cited in the earlier sections.

However, there is no necessity to read the sections consecutively. You *can* approach them that way and, in so doing, you will cover a spread of the major preoccupations in contemporary feminist literary criticism or you can simply dip into sections that appeal to you.

Sections vary, somewhat, in length – some issues take longer to explore than others – and material varies in complexity. As I noted above, the individual reader can work in her own way on these different levels of material, immediately responding in some cases, undertaking further reading and thought in others. Some material is approachable for students with no knowledge of feminist criticism; some, while not presuming a detailed knowledge, is certainly easier to grasp if you have experience of feminist criticism or a willingness to acquire that experience. If you are working in a group or in an institutional setting, this multi-level approach aims to provide something, not for everybody all the time, but for a good number of potential readers for a fair amount of the time.

Some questions demand a personal response but, in gathering information or testing out hypotheses, a group approach is often helpful. When working in groups try not to come to a too-easy consensus or to be swayed by the most authoritative voice. Keep questioning yourself and each other; be alert to contradictions and inconsistencies in the argument; develop the most creative and suggestive elements in the debate.

If you are studying in higher education, you could use the book as supportive reading within a course: indeed, your tutor might direct you in this. One section

might be useful preparation for a seminar, another might reinforce what was said in a lecture, a third might feed in to research for an essay – and so on.

It helps if you make links between the material in different sections. At some stages I advise the reader to look at another section but you may find other links, comparisons and contrasts that I have not anticipated. Such links reinforce ideas and open up new avenues.

Think also about interrelating the approaches. There may be certain kinds of questions which you find particularly productive. In that case, apply those questions in other sections you read. You will get most out of the book if you use it flexibly – establish dialogues, carry over ideas, see if comments from one section relate elsewhere, adapt it to suit your needs and interests.

Are you the reader I have in mind?

Narrative theory talks about someone called the ‘implied reader’. (We shall discuss this figure further in the section on Feminist Reading.) This is not the real, living reader of the book but a creation of the book itself, the kind of reader the book needs so as to be understood. Thus, with this book, for instance, the implied reader would have to take feminist ideas seriously. This does not necessarily mean you have to be a feminist and certainly not that you have to show a solemn reverence for every feminist proposition; rather, what is needed is a willingness to debate feminism as a valid literary and political critique. If the reader thought the ideas of feminism were something akin to those of the Flat Earth Society – I hope I am not unintentionally insulting all my Flat Earth readers here – then the whole project would be a non-starter.

Narrative theory discusses also the ‘narratee’ who is the person to whom a book’s narrator is speaking. Sometimes the narratee can be directly addressed as in that famous moment in *Jane Eyre* when the narrator says, ‘Reader, I married him.’ This workbook is clearly not, in any conventional sense, a narrative but I do have a strong sense of the person I am addressing and my ‘narratee’ is female. When I say ‘you’, I am thinking of a female ‘you’ and my focus is on *women* writers, experiences common among *women* and issues of femininity. This is not to say that men cannot read the book and that it has nothing to say about/to men, experiences common among men and issues of masculinity. Let me clarify:

Visibility of women

Readers and practitioners of feminist criticism are more likely to be female. So, one could say that on pragmatic grounds a female narratee is suitable. That may be the case but, for me, the political argument is more fundamental. If feminists do not try to make women visible, the historical record shows that nobody else will. My experience indicates that it is still necessary to remind the world that women exist. My emphasis on ‘she’ is a gesture in that direction.

Gender is a major issue

Literary feminists are very conscious of how gender affects the processes of reading and writing: authors are

not neuters speaking to neuters. Whether you agree or not with my insistence on 'she', I am raising the issue simply by being explicit about the female sex of my narratee. I suspect that many studies you read, whether in literature, history, the social sciences etc., fail to consider gender as a relevant factor: that silence is as resonant as speech. You might also ask why many people still believe that using the pronoun 'he' all the time is 'normal' while using the pronoun 'she' all the time is 'ideological'. If this is a topic that you find interesting and/or contentious, you could look especially at the material in this book on Feminist Reading and at the recommendations for further reading.

For male readers

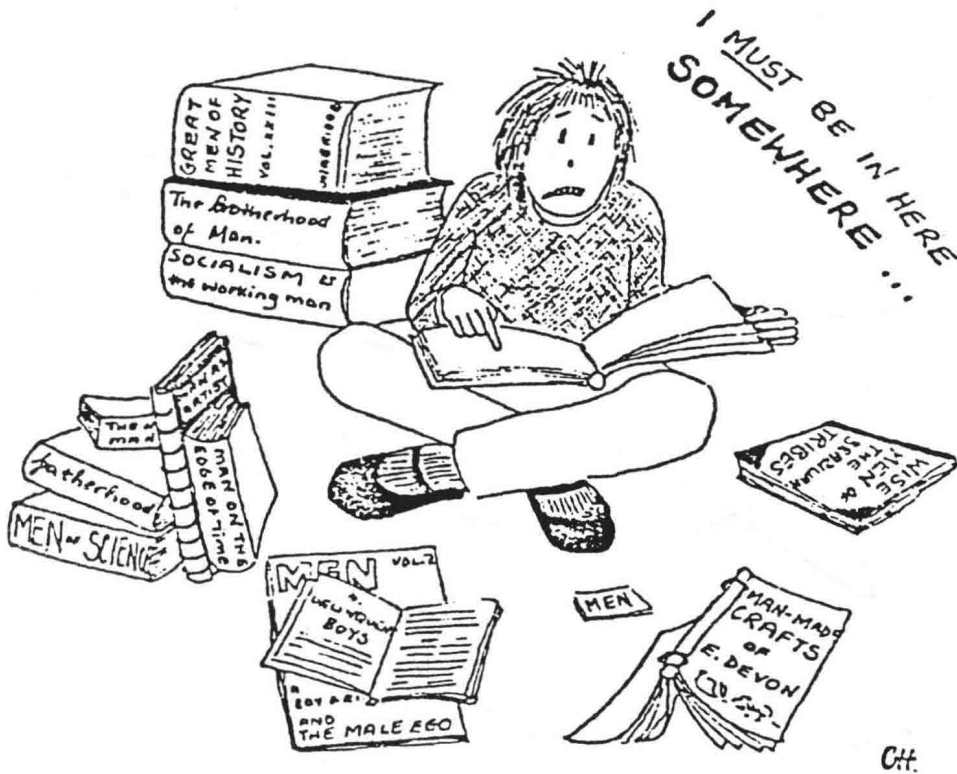
If my 'you' is female, then how might a man read this book? The answer – which is not at all flippant – is, in any way he thinks best. Some suggestions are:

- to consider the difference of a woman-to-woman writing/reading experience
- to approach material through the perspective of a mother, sister, female friend
- to link issues of femininity to issues of masculinity
- to become more conscious of the issues of gendered reading, of what it means to read 'as a man'.

Research and reference

A developing sub-genre in recent fiction is the novel about academic life; the 'campus' novels of David Lodge or Malcolm Bradbury would fit within this group as would Tom Sharpe's *Wilt* (1976). Of interest to me are those novels which discuss specifically 'feminist academic research and/or the experience of investigating a woman's history. I am thinking, for instance, of the end of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1987) when the heroine's life and words become research material for male academics; or of the research processes undertaken in Alison Lurie's *The Truth About Lorin Jones* (1988) and Antonia Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1991), where the discovery of 'lost' women artists leads to profoundly unsettling reassessments; or of the search for a woman's history across space and time in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World* (1994). One thing that these texts point to is that research is far from being the disinterested activity academic mythology might like us to believe. Political, economic and ideological pressures, complex personal motives, unconscious desires, academic rivalry, plain error all render the research process imperfect.

For feminists, that imperfection has shown itself most starkly in the absence of reference material on women's lives and work. A research process aspiring to both impartiality and general application had seemingly overlooked half the human race. Which names, what meanings and material should be included in reference volumes; how is this data to be selected; how is it to be prioritized; how is it contextualized? For example, is Dorothy Wordsworth an author in her own right



Cartoon by Carolyn Hillyer, Women's Studies International Forum, Pergamon Press

with a separate bio/bibliographical entry or is she, merely, sister and helper of William with a sentence to herself at the end of his entry?

Much of the material I list here, as an aid to your research, has been published in the last ten years, which is a measure of both the gap that needed to be filled and the considerable amount of research work that has been done in our time. It is difficult to put limits on this material since women's writing and feminist criticism have interconnected easily with many other critical discourse and subject disciplines. Thus, volumes of feminist literary criticism readily link with material in cultural criticism, with feminist thought generally, with related studies in history and the social sciences, with political theory ... and so on. In an attempt to keep some kind of grip on the material, I have confined myself as far as possible to:

- works concerned with language, women writers and feminist criticism
- works readily available in Great Britain and North America.

The texts are divided into seven categories:

- dictionaries
- biographical dictionaries of women writers
- bibliographies of research on women
- anthologies of women's writing
- introductions to feminist criticism
- journals and magazines

- handbooks, guides, others.

The happy news is that we can now, at least, start putting together bibliographies of reference material on the history of literary women. Fifteen years ago, reference material would have been mostly limited to the 'star' names – Austen, the Brontës, Dickinson etc.

Dictionaries

These dictionaries follow three main tacks: tracing the etymology of words to discover earlier meanings of interest to women; redefining existing terms; coining new terms and meanings. Kramarae and Treichler define their terms through copious quotation; thus, the dictionary becomes also an excellent guide to further reading. Humm's dictionary, as the title indicates, confines itself to terms from feminist theory.

Mary Daly and Jane Caputi, *Webster's First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*

Maggie Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*

Cheris Kramarae and Paula A. Treichler, *Amazons, Bluestockings and Crones: A Feminist Dictionary*

Rosalie Maggio, *The Bias-Free Word Finder: A Dictionary of Nondiscriminatory Language*

Jane Mills, *Womanwords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Patriarchal Society*

Monique Wittig and Sandie Zeig, *Lesbian Peoples: Materials for A Dictionary*

See also, Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. It is a shame that, even in this revised edition of his 1976 and 1983 work, Williams barely addressed feminism. Neither 'feminism' nor 'gender' appear as keywords; 'women's liberation' gets a passing reference under 'liberation'. Nevertheless, this book does trace the etymology of many words that are central to an understanding of our culture and that are frequently employed in critical theory – feminism included.

Biographical dictionaries

These studies give details of the biography and literary achievement of each woman author. In addition they may include material on the author's social and historical context, details of the reception of the author's work, advice as to further reading, introductory essays etc. The term 'literary' is interpreted in its widest sense: novelists and poets are found alongside the authors of hymns, household manuals, guides to midwifery, political tracts. These volumes are a useful starting point for research, especially for a new project when you have little knowledge on which to build.

Maureen Bell, George Parfitt, Simon Shepherd (eds), *A Biographical Dictionary of English Women Writers, 1580–1720*

Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements, Isobel Grundy, *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present*

Claire Buck (ed.), *Bloomsbury Guide to Women's Literature*

Anne Crawford et al., *Europa Biographical Dictionary of British Women*

Frank M. Magill (ed.) *Great Women Writers: The Lives and Works of 135 of the World's Most Important Women Writers from Antiquity to the Present*

Lina Mainiero, *American Women Writers: from Colonial Times to the Present*

Paul Schlueter and June Schlueter (eds), *An Encyclopaedia of British Women Writers*

Joanne Shattock, *The Oxford Guide to British Women Writers*

Janet Todd (ed.), *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1660–1800*

Janet Todd (ed.) *Dictionary of British Women Writers*

Jennifer Uglow and Frances Hinton, *The Macmillan Dictionary of Women's Biography*

Ann Owens Weekes, *Unveiling Treasures: The Attic Guide to the Published Works of Irish Women Literary Writers*

Bibliographies of relevance to women

Bibliographies and bibliographical essays are an excellent way of rapidly surveying the field, getting a quick idea of the research that has been done and where it would be most profitable for you to concentrate your efforts. Bibliographies of Women's Studies obviously consider a wide range of women's concerns but the literary, linguistic and cultural are always among them. Think also of bibliographies of individual writers. Well-known women writers – Austen, Eliot, the Brontës, Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Sylvia Plath etc. – have reference material on their work. Similarly, it is useful to research bibliographies of particular areas of writing – American literature, the novel, the Gothic etc. – since women practitioners are included.

Patricia K. Ballou, *Women: A Bibliography of Bibliographies*

Gwenn Davis and Beverly Joyce, *Personal Writings by Women to 1900: A Bibliography of American and British Writers*

Gwenn Davis and Beverly Joyce, *Poetry by Women to 1900: A Bibliography of American and British Writers*

Gwenn Davis and Beverly Joyce, *Drama by Women to 1900: A Bibliography of American and British Writers*

Maureen Ritchie, *Women's Studies: A Checklist of Bibliographies*

Patricia E. Sweeney, *Biographies of British Women: An Annotated Bibliography*

Related to bibliographies are abstracting periodicals which give synopses not only of books but of articles in journals. See:

Studies on Women Abstracts

Anthologies

Anthologies of women's writing are now in plentiful supply. Some collections are devoted to particular groups of women writers (mothers and daughters, Jewish women); some to particular historical periods; to particular countries; to particular forms of writing (collections of short stories, modernist writing). What I offer here are more general anthologies covering a wide historical and/or geographical spread. If you feel your experience of women's writing is limited, spending time with one of these large anthologies is an easy and pleasurable way to get a sense of the range of women's writing and to discover new women authors.

Marian Arkin and Barbara Shollar, *Longman Anthology of World Literature by Women: 1875–1975*

Aliki Barnstone and Willis Barnstone (eds), *A Book of Women Poets from Antiquity to Now*

Louise Bernikow, *The World Split Open: Four Centuries of Women Poets in England and America, 1552–1950*

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (eds), *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English*.

Olga Kenyon, *800 Years of Women's Letters. The Tradition in English*.

Carolyn Larrington, *Women and Writing in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*

Ann Allen Schockley, *Afro-American Women Writers, 1746–1933: An Anthology and Critical Guide*

Dale Spender and Janet Todd, *Anthology of British Women Writers: From the Middle Ages to the Present*

Introductions to feminist criticism

If you are new to feminist criticism I suggest you look first at some of the surveys, readers and collections of essays that have been produced in this area. These will give you a sense of the scope of feminist criticism and of the way in which it has contributed to and learned from other critical positions. *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* has a wider remit than the literary but I include it here as sections on representation and writing do feature and other concerns, such as concepts of subjectivity and experience, are relevant to our focus. All these texts have suggestions for further reading so if you find a feminist approach or critic that interests you, you can follow the reference.

Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, David M. Halperin (eds), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*

Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (eds), *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*

Mary Eagleton (ed.), *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*

Mary Eagleton (ed.), *Feminist Literary Criticism*

Maggie Humm (ed.), *Feminisms: A reader*