

THIRD
EDITION

FEMINIST LITERARY THEORY

A Reader

EDITED BY
MARY EAGLETON



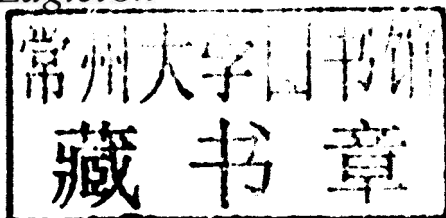
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Preface to the Third Edition

The first edition of *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader* was published in 1986. It was an attempt to give an introduction – chiefly for students – to the outpouring of material following the rise in feminist activism and critiques in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. This work profoundly impacted on education, on what was seen as legitimate knowledge and, for our purposes here, on the field of imaginative and critical writing: who wrote, in what ways, for whom, about what, and in what locations became highly significant questions. Many of the names included in the 1986 edition continued through the second edition in 1996 and into this third edition. Critics such as Elaine Showalter, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Hélène Cixous, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and many more, have achieved a status as key figures in their fields, both defining a particular moment or position and opening up debates to ongoing scrutiny. Now in its third edition, the *Reader* has inevitably become, to some extent, a history of feminist literary studies. In addition to earlier extracts from Virginia Woolf, it spans the period from 1965 to the present and one of my strongest pieces of advice to those using this volume would be always to check the date of the extracts you are reading. In so doing, you will get a sense of the ideas current at any particular period, the differences amongst those ideas and how responses have developed, changed and endured over time. In fact, a whole other way of reading this volume would be to ignore the chapter divisions and read the material historically.

You will notice my use of plurals in that sentence above – ‘ideas’, ‘differences’, ‘responses’. Readers of this book have sometimes expressed the view that they would like rather *fewer* ideas, differences and responses; they felt overwhelmed by the amount and range of material and thought that having fewer, longer extracts or full essays would be more manageable and allow them to follow through an argument to a conclusion. I understand that point of view and there are many excellent collections that do precisely that,

but this volume is trying to do something different. In the Preface to the second edition I wrote: 'I have kept to passages which succinctly summarize one or two important points. The aim is to provide readers with a taster – if you want a different metaphor, a snap-shot – and my hope is that they will then pursue further the ideas that interest them.' This is still the aim. With 122 extracts, 57 of them new, all chapters updated and a new chapter, 'Writing "Glocal"', with the Introduction to each chapter fully revised and the footnotes providing extensive guidance on further study, I believe that every reader will find material of relevance and provocation which can then be the basis for more research. There is no demand to start at the beginning and work through. Just as an historical perspective offers a different approach, so too following a single idea across several chapters and in the extended reading suggested in the footnotes can be highly illuminating. Most especially, the plethora of material guards against over-simplifications. For example, one cannot say that 'seventies feminism' or 'postmodern feminism' is synonymous with this or that position, or that 'French feminism' signifies 'x', or that stylistically women's writing has 'y' as a common characteristic because, repeatedly, within and between the extracts one finds such simplicities becoming more complicated and nuanced. There is no single, direct road through feminist literary theory, but there are many fascinating parallel routes, interchanges, detours and crossroads. Thus, to study feminist literary theory is both a diachronic and synchronic activity. It is concerned with a history, development, continuity and change over time, but it is also preoccupied with the diversity of the moment, the richness of and dialogue between different positions.

My other piece of advice would be to focus on these dialogues and debates, and although at various points in the Introductions I alert readers to possible links, I would encourage them to seek out their own connections. I have employed three strategies. Firstly, within each chapter, I deliberately introduce a variety of material and positions with respect to the chapter topic. I am keen to counter any sense of feminism having a party line within its politics or definitive theoretical conclusions. On occasions, extracts are responding directly to earlier material; for example, in Chapter 4, Madhu Dubey comments on bell hooks' extract concerning the meaning of the marginal, while Robyn Wiegman responds to Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson on postmodern feminism. But the aim of the second extract is not to counter the first but to question and supplement; it is to dispute rather than refute, to add to the ebbs and flows of a critical discourse. Secondly, the millennium greatly encouraged retrospective and prospective assessments, and many extracts from around that period engage in reviews of the field and mappings of future lines of enquiry. Most notably, individual critics – Toril Moi or Judith Butler, for example – are able to return to their early, formative work to reassess it. Thirdly, I have enhanced discussion of

pre-nineteenth-century literature. To read Margaret J. M. Ezell or Betty A. Schellenberg on feminist historiography (Chapter 1), or Paula McDowell on earlier forms of women's literary production (Chapter 2), or Clare Brant on the multiple genres employed in eighteenth-century women's writing (Chapter 3) once again leads us into questioning presumptions and making necessary comparisons.

The chapter divisions with which, from the start, I structured this *Reader* remain valid. One cannot imagine *not* raising questions of authorship, literary tradition, production, readership, genre, difference, interactions with other literary theories; such topics are the bedrock of any discussion. In the second edition, I added a new chapter in response to the impact of postmodernism in the early 1990s and the wide interest, through both postmodernism and psychoanalysis, in subjectivity. In this edition, I include a chapter which explores literary feminism's concern with place, space and location. This springs in part from feminism's conversation with postcolonial theory and, more widely, with feminism's understanding of how writing may be precisely situated culturally and geographically, but also the product of imperial, diasporic and transnational forces. Thus, our critical perspective in the twenty-first century is both local and global and, in a globalized world, those questions with which we started – who wrote, in what ways, for whom, about what – take on another inflection.

This new chapter also encourages the cross-readings I am advising. For example, the problem of defining terms and the often tricky relation between terms, discussed in Chapter 4, is revisited; how do 'first world' and 'third world' speak and read each other would be one instance. Dialogues are again established. So Sara Suleri and Rey Chow respond to Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Trinh T. Minh-ha, while Caren Kaplan questions Adrienne Rich. As elsewhere, issues of production and genre are important. Hence, the interest in marketing, touched on in Chapter 2, is discussed here in the work of Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj, and the generic forms considered in Chapter 3 are extended, in the final chapter, to include travel writing. Finally, that focus on 'the literary', so central to the whole collection, is further explored in this chapter in, for instance, Mary Louise Pratt's and Elleke Boehmer's comments on narrative strategies or in Laura E. Franey's discussion of 'verbal violence'.

There is then, I trust, an openness in this collection to the diversity of feminist literary theory, to its changing narrative across the decades and within different locations, and to the multiple ways it has related to other critical discourses. But, for good or ill, one has to set parameters on one's topic; one can never be all things to all people. Hence, whenever I have been unsure about the relevance of a particular extract, I have always returned to the title of the collection, *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, and asked myself a series of questions: does this extract spring from or speak to a

feminist politics; though the term is problematic, does this extract engage with 'the literary' as a formal, stylistically conscious, communicative activity; does the extract raise issues about the production, reception, reading or interpretation of women's writing; will the extract inform and stimulate the reader? If, in my own mind, I can answer 'yes' to those four questions then there is a possibility the extract will be included, but even then, there are still a whole number of invidious choices to make and difficulties to confront with respect to volume, range, accessibility and gaining permission to reprint. One treads a wobbly line between recognizing the porous borders and conceptual vitality of feminist literary theory and, at the same time, the intellectual and practical need to put some shape and limits on that heterogeneity.

I am very grateful to colleagues at Wiley-Blackwell who have been so helpful, patient and professional throughout the production of this third edition and to my colleagues at Leeds Metropolitan University, past and present, who have supported me in so many ways, not least by their intellectual liveliness and warm collegiality. I am especially thankful to my friends in the Contemporary Women Writers' Network and on the journal, *Contemporary Women's Writing*, who give daily proof of the continued importance of feminist literary theory and of feminist practice as both possible and productive. Finally, I give my loving thanks to David and Matt for always being there.

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