

# A LITERATURE OF THEIR OWN

British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing



EXPANDED  
EDITION

ELAINE SHOWALTER

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BRONTË TO LESSING

Expanded Edition

*Elaine Showalter*

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IN the atlas of the English novel, women's territory is usually depicted as desert bounded by mountains on four sides: the Austen peaks, the Brontë cliffs, the Eliot range, and the Woolf hills. This book is an attempt to fill in the terrain between these literary landmarks and to construct a more reliable map from which to explore the achievements of English women novelists.

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## Introduction

### Twenty Years On: *A Literature of Their Own* Revisited

IN 1965, when I began to do research for my Ph.D. dissertation on Victorian women writers, feminist criticism did not exist. Virginia Woolf's letters and diaries were scattered and unpublished. Scholars still called Elizabeth Gaskell "Mrs." and Frances Burney "Fanny." No one edited women's studies journals or compiled bibliographies of women's writing. At the University of California in Davis, where I was studying, "Theory" was not even a shadow on the sunny horizon, and the New Criticism, F. R. Leavis, Northrop Frye, and seven kinds of ambiguity marked the boundaries of my critical sophistication. I had chosen my thesis topic in part out of lingering anger at my undergraduate college, Bryn Mawr, where English majors were required to read every tenth-rate male Romantic poet and Elizabethan dramatist, but virtually no women; and in part out of my own devotion to the Victorian women writers.

Professional opportunities for academic women seemed so limited in the mid-1960s that I felt paradoxically freed to write about the books I liked, rather than the ones most likely to get me a job. Gwendolyn Needham, my thesis adviser at Davis, was sympathetic to my ideas and demanding about my scholarship, but my dissertation, "The Double Standard: Criticism of Women Writers in Victorian Periodicals, 1845-1880," was a hybrid, an attempt to write about women in an outmoded and inadequate critical vocabulary. Princeton University, where I actually wrote most of the dissertation as a faculty wife from 1966 on, did not hire women, but it had a fabulous collection of Victorian fic-

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tion, and all the Victorian journals were still on the open shelves, although only the first volume of the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* was available to help me identify anonymous reviewers.

By 1970, when I received my Ph.D., the mood of the country had changed, and I had become an active member of the women's liberation movement. I had spent the summer of 1968 in Paris living in a communal household of French, English, and American students and professors in the aftermath of the politically transformative *événements* of May, and had been involved with the antiwar protests at the MLA. I had started writing for *Radical Feminism*, and I was editing an anthology called *Women's Liberation and Literature*. As the issues in my work and my life took on new meaning in the light of feminism, I began to envisage a much bolder critical undertaking than my thesis, and to imagine a literary criticism that would do for the history of women's writing what Northrop Frye had done for Canadian literature, or even what Perry Miller and F. O. Matthiessen had done for American literature.

At Douglass College, the women's college of Rutgers University, I had been promoted from part-time lecturer to assistant professor, and had started to teach courses on women writers. With the support of Richard Poirier and Frederick Main at Rutgers, I was awarded an English Department fellowship and spent a year in England doing research and using the dissertation as the basis of a book that would take the story up to the present. Traveling around chilly municipal libraries in England in quest of women writers' archives, I was often rewarded by becoming the first scholar to read a harrowing journal or open a box of letters. Victorian women writers, whom I thought of by their initials, CB, GE, EG, EBB, became my closest companions, more real to me than my own sister. And in the W.S.P.U. collection at the London Museum and the women's movement collection at the Fawcett Library, I found "free zones



in the library world, newfound lands for scholars to explore."<sup>1</sup>

I had set myself the task of filling in the gaps between Austen and Lessing by reading as many novels by English women as I could find, and trying to understand the ways they related to each other. If there was a female literary tradition, I was sure, it came from imitation, literary convention, the marketplace, and critical reception, not from biology or psychology. My theoretical structure came from the sociology and ethnography of literature. Looking at such literary subcultures as African-American writing, Canadian writing, and Anglo-Indian writing, I attempted to define women's writing as the product of a subculture, evolving with relation to a dominant mainstream. In its evolution, I argued, women's writing moves "in the direction of an all-inclusive female realism, a broad, socially informed exploration of the daily lives and values of women within the family and the community."<sup>2</sup> But a mature women's literature ceases to be part of a subculture, and can move into "a seamless participation in the literary mainstream."<sup>3</sup> When I argued that "the ultimate room of one's own is the grave," I took a stance—*avant la lettre*—against theories of *écriture féminine*. "If the room of one's own becomes the destination," I concluded, "a feminine secession from the political world, from 'male' power, logic, and violence, it is a tomb, like Clarissa Dalloway's attic bedroom. But if contact with a female tradition and a female culture is a center; if women take strength in their independence to act in the world," women's literature could take any form, and deal with any subject.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Elaine Showalter and Jean L'Esperance, "Notes from London," *Women's Studies* 1, no. 2 (1973): 225.

<sup>2</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 319.

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My research raised many questions I didn't know how to solve, but I felt sure that there would be an audience for my book; and the writers themselves kept me going as I read about their hopes that all their struggles and failures would make a difference to the women who came after. They gave me the confidence to believe that even if I were not Northrop Frye's sister—the great feminist critic who would get everything right—it was enough to find the courage to write exactly what I thought, and to be willing to share my own struggles and errors in the faith that the critics who came after me would know more and do better.

I sent the manuscript to Princeton University Press, and they accepted it with some substantial cuts—half of the chapter on Virginia Woolf bit the dust. Their "Titles Committee" also changed my working title from "The Female Literary Tradition in the English Novel" to *A Literature of Their Own*, from a statement by John Stuart Mill, whom I quote on the first page and third sentence of the book: "If women lived in a different country from men, and had never read any of their writings, they would have a literature of their own."<sup>5</sup>

I liked the title, because this sentence from Mill's *The Subjection of Women* had been my point of departure: it raised the issues of nationality, subculture, literary influence, and literary autonomy I had attempted to theorize; and, in the word "their," rather than "our," it emphasized my own cultural distance, as an American, from the English women I discussed. The phrase "of their own," or "of our own," in the titles of feminist scholarly and popular books has certainly had quite a vogue in the past twenty years; but almost all reviewers of the book ignored my reference to Mill. They interpreted the title as a reference to Virginia Woolf, whom, some thought, I had treated with insufficient reverence. Toril Moi perceived hidden motives of appropriation and rejection: "A distinguished feminist critic like

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

Elaine Showalter, for example, signals her subtle swerve away from Virginia Woolf by taking over, yet changing, Woolf's title. Under Showalter's pen, *A Room of One's Own* becomes *A Literature of Their Own*, as if she wished to indicate her problematic distance from the tradition of women writers she lovingly uncovers in her book.<sup>6</sup> Janet Todd noted that "In *A Literature of Their Own*, already a snub, many thought, to the original Woolfian text, *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf was trounced for evading the problem of femaleness in her projection of the disturbing and dark aspects of a woman's psyche onto men."<sup>7</sup> Only the Australian critic K. K. Ruthven emphasized Mill, to take exception to the "separatism" of writing a book about women writers alone, for, he argued, "men and women inhabit the same countries and read each other's work habitually."<sup>8</sup>

Having a male critic like Ruthven comment on the book was already progress. Certainly women writers and critics must and do habitually read the work of men; until very recently, however, the reverse has not been the case. The critical reception of *A Literature of Their Own* by men has been generally respectful, but among women critics the book has been both imitated and reviled. On one hand, it helped create the new field of feminist literary history and gynocriticism, has been translated into several languages, and has influenced similar undertakings around the world. I've even been cited in an article on the evolution of women's rock music.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, I have been attacked from virtually every point on the feminist hermeneutic circle, as a separatist, careerist, theoretical, antitheoretic-

<sup>6</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, London and New York: Methuen, 1985, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Janet Todd, *Feminist Literary History*, London and New York: Routledge, 1988, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> K. K. Ruthven, *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 124.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Wurtzel, "Girl Trouble," *The New Yorker*, June 29, 1992, pp. 63-70.

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cal, racist, homophobic, politically correct, traditional, and noncanonical critic. For the past twenty years I've come to expect new critical studies of women's writing to point out how I have "failed," and in 1997, at the book exhibit at the MLA convention in Toronto, I picked up galleys of a new book that added that I had "notoriously failed."

Still, being notorious for failing is better than not being noticed at all; and I decided early on that I would not defend *A Literature of Their Own* against attack, but rather that I would try to let go of the book and allow intellectual debate in feminist criticism to follow its natural course. I've continued to work on women writers and on the theory of feminist criticism, and to move on to other subjects as well. I have followed the cycles of criticism and attack with attention and interest, and I have even had the good fortune to live long enough to receive a few apologies, in person or in print.

Most important, I've had the advantages of two decades of a fruitful and dazzling critical revolution in women's literary history and feminist criticism to broaden my understanding, deepen my knowledge, and sharpen my thinking. *A Literature of Their Own* appeared during the first wave of feminist literary criticism which focused on rediscovery. In the early 1970s, I found it important to write about continuities between generations of women writers, and I deliberately foregrounded women critics as well. But the emphasis on female literary lineage is partly rhetorical, for women's writing is always at least bitextual; as I wrote in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," it is a double-voiced discourse influenced by both the dominant masculine literary tradition and the muted feminine one.<sup>10</sup>

By the end of the 1970s, in their magisterial study of women writers, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar set out a compelling theory of

<sup>10</sup> Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 179-205.

female literary history as a dialogue between women writers and a patriarchal tradition. Their own theory was a revision of Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence," presenting the battle between the sexes as a linguistic and literary struggle that generated new genres and forms. Moreover, Gilbert and Gubar mapped out an anxiety-ridden terrain for nineteenth-century women writers that seemed unconsciously to describe the psychodynamics of the contemporary feminist critic: feelings of alienation from male precursors, an urgent need for a female audience, dread of patriarchal authority, and internalized conflict about theoretical invention and imaginative autonomy. In their critical trilogy *No Man's Land*, Gilbert and Gubar moved into the twentieth century to describe the ways that women artists were not only enabled but also daunted by the example of great female precursors, and how they responded with "mingled feelings of rivalry and anxiety."<sup>11</sup>

In the 1990s, criticism of women's writing has to take the fullest possible account of the whole network of literary forces in which each text is enmeshed, and my hypothetical model of a chain of female literary influence needs to be understood as a historically specific strategy rather than a dogmatic absolute. The eve of a new century seems like the ideal time for stocktaking, and the prospect of a revised new edition of *A Literature of Their Own* gives me the opportunity to reflect on what has taken place and how I would want to change the book if I were writing it now.

## THEORIES

In the 1980s, as European theoretical models came to dominate literary criticism, feminist critics of *A Literature of Their Own* pointed to my theoretical "naïveté" and my

<sup>11</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The War of the Words*, vol. 1 of *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988, p. 199.

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stubborn American pragmatism. Some critics identified theoretical contexts in my writing of which I myself had certainly been unaware. Patricia Waugh noted that “theories of ego-psychologists and the cognitive developmental models of Erikson, Piaget, and Kohlberg hover behind the pages . . . of feminist literary histories like Elaine Showalter’s.”<sup>12</sup> Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn argued that “implicit in Showalter’s argument—as in much Anglo-American feminist criticism—is the assumption that the text, and language itself, are transparent media which reflect a pre-existent objective reality, rather than signifying systems which inscribe ideology and are actually constitutive of reality.”<sup>13</sup>

The most substantial attack came from Toril Moi, in *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985). Even before her book came out, I had heard rumors that it would be very critical of my work, and I had received a letter from Moi assuring me that her stringent critique came from deep sisterly respect. (This is the standard feminist academic formula for “Brace yourself.”) Indeed, from the first page of the book, *Sexual/Textual Politics* used my work, along with that of Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and others, to exemplify the inadequacies of “Anglo-American” feminist criticism.

Moi’s central argument is that my “theoretical framework is never made explicit.” In her view, my implicit theory was that “a text should reflect the writer’s experience, and that the more authentic the experience is felt to be by the reader, the more valuable the text.” “Implicitly,” she maintains, my position “strongly favours the form of writing commonly known as critical or bourgeois realism.” Indeed, Moi declares, “there is detectable within her literary criticism a strong unquestioned belief in the

<sup>12</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern*, London and New York: Routledge, 1989, p. 40.

<sup>13</sup> Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn, *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, London and New York: Methuen, 1985, p. 25.

values, not of proletarian humanism, but of traditional bourgeois humanism of a liberal-individualist kind." In my "crypto-Lukacsian" realism, my "demand for a unitary vision," and my dependence on "traditional aesthetic categories,"<sup>14</sup> I am unable to appreciate the decentered writing of modernism and its feminist uses.

Moi returns to discuss *A Literature of Their Own* in two pages in her fourth chapter, "Women writing and writing about women," in which she reiterates her view that its flaws lie in "its unstated theoretical assumptions about the relationship between literature and reality and between feminist politics and literary evaluation." In contrast, she maintains, the poststructuralist theory of French feminism in general, and of Julia Kristeva in particular, is the most sophisticated and far-reaching form of feminist literary analysis. Rejecting biologism and essentialism, it deconstructs "the opposition between masculinity and femininity."<sup>15</sup>

Moi's analysis of feminist criticism has been very influential, and in the U.K., where *Sexual/Textual Politics* is a standard university text, many students take their views of *A Literature of Their Own* directly from it, without reading my work at all. Undisputably, I had not read or even heard of Cixous, Irigaray, or Kristeva, who were barely known in the U.S. when I finished the book in 1974. *New French Feminisms*, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, which introduced American scholars to French feminist writing, did not come out until 1980. But as a literary historian, I would still have found little that was useful in their work. More significantly, in her own immersion in French and Marxist criticism, Moi missed the real theoretical assumptions of *A Literature of Their Own*, assumptions derived from a very different approach to literature, reality, gender, and canon. In Moi's view, the most important theoretical questions were philosophical: "What is interpretation? What

<sup>14</sup> *Sexual/Textual Politics*, pp. 4, 6, 8, and 17.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56 and 12.

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does it mean to read? What is a text?"<sup>16</sup> My theoretical questions, however, were historical and cultural. What is the relationship between a dominant and a muted culture? Does a muted culture have a history and a literature of its own, or must it always be measured according to the chronology, standards, and values of the dominant? Can a minority criticism develop its own methods and theories through wide and careful reading of its own literary texts? How does a literary subculture evolve and change? The disciplines with answers for such questions were not philosophy and linguistics, but cultural anthropology and social history.

If I were writing *A Literature of Their Own* today, I would certainly have a broader comparative base in literary subcultures, and in the theories that have emerged around post-colonial studies. I would also make a stronger theoretical case for "realism" as a literary convention. As George Levine has demonstrated in *The Realistic Imagination*, Victorian narrative realism is far from being a simplistic mimetic rendering of "experience," male or female. It is a highly developed technique of representation, with its own theoretical underpinnings.<sup>17</sup> In addition, there is nothing inherently radical or subversive about antirealist literary conventions. Today's avant-garde is tomorrow's advertising. Despite its intellectual vogue, French feminist theory has still not come to terms with women's writing and literary history, and many of its leading figures have moved on to other subjects.

Meanwhile, gynocriticism, as I named the study of women's writing in 1979, has developed to offer a coherent narrative of women's literary history. In relation to the literary mainstream, women's writing has moved through phases of subordination, protest, and autonomy, phases connected by recurring images, metaphors, themes, and plots that emerge from women's social and literary experience, and from

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 76-77.

<sup>17</sup> See George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, pp. 131-228.



reading both male and female precursors. As Susan Wolfson notes in her excellent overview of feminist criticism and British literature, “by the early 1980s it was clear that feminist literary criticism and attention to female writers had gained institutional legitimacy. These achievements consolidated over the decade, their success evident in the curricula of English courses from junior high school through graduate school. . . . And the classroom anthologies . . . have evolved accordingly.” Wolfson concludes that “the 1990s are shaping up as a decade in which women’s writing is becoming increasingly available by force of new anthologies and reprints of long-out-of-print writing by women, and by the mergence of on-line texts and editions of women’s writing, accessible on the internet through (among other websites) the University of Virginia’s Electronic Text Center, the Brown University Women Writers Project, and the University of Pennsylvania Department of English home page.”<sup>18</sup>

### *Literary History and the Canon*

I had imagined *A Literature of Their Own* as a book that would challenge the traditional canon, going far beyond the handful of acceptable women writers to look at all the minor and forgotten figures whose careers and books had shaped a tradition. “It is only by considering them all—Millicent Grogan as well as Virginia Woolf,” I wrote, “that we can begin to record new choices in a new literary history.”<sup>19</sup> I wanted to demystify the process by which some women writers had been granted “greatness” and reveal the material contexts and circumstances in which women’s writing was imagined, published, disseminated, and reviewed. Nevertheless, some critics have objected to

<sup>18</sup> Susan Wolfson, *British Literature: Discipline Analysis*, Baltimore: National Center for Curriculum Transformation Resources on Women, 1997, pp. 12–13 and 18.

<sup>19</sup> *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 36.