

A p p r o a c h i n g L i t e r a t u r e

Literature and Gender

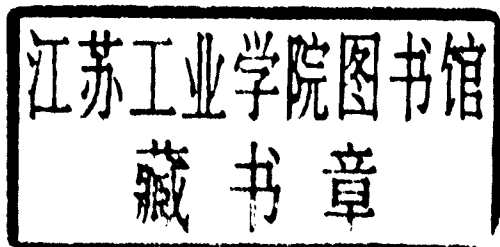
e d i t e d b y L i z b e t h G o o d m a n



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in association with The Open University

Copyright © 1996 The Open University
First published 1996 by Routledge in association with The Open University
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street
New York, NY 10001

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Edited, designed and typeset by The Open University
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives PLC
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data applied for.
ISBN 0-415-13573-7 hardback
ISBN 0-415-13574-5 paperback
a210vol2i1.1
1.1

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Preface

This book is one of a four-volume series, which has been designed to offer a range of different but current approaches to the study of literature. Each volume is free-standing and is designed as an introduction to a different aspect of literary study. This one focuses on the concept of gender as a concern relevant to the writing, reading and interpretation of literary texts, and especially those by women.

The book covers all three major literary genres: prose fiction, poetry and drama (including both play texts and performances), with reference to a wide range of themes. Among these are the conflict between 'femininity' and creativity in women's lives and writing; the construction of female characters by female and male authors of different historical periods; autobiography and fiction; the gendering of language and body language; cycles of influence between women writers; the importance of 'a room of one's own'; the theme of 'madness'; and the intersection of race, class and gender in the writing, reading and interpretation of literature. Most of the literature discussed in the book is printed in Part Two of this volume. There is a new anthology of poetry; most of it is by women, all is 'about' gender. Fiction includes a thriller by Louisa May Alcott, Virginia Woolf's short story 'The New Dress', Jamaica Kincaid's story 'Girl', Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper', Susan Glaspell's play *Trifles* and her story 'A Jury of her Peers'.

Literature and Gender has been designed to prepare readers for higher-level study, and to provide a solid understanding of the relevance and importance of gender issues. The text begins at a very accessible level and increases slightly in the level of sophistication chapter by chapter, refining the process of reading and learning throughout the book. Exercises in reading and studying literature with sample discussion are included in each chapter.

Thanks are due to Open University colleagues for contributions and feedback on the material in this book, and to the editorial, design and production teams. Particular thanks to Julie Dickens, Abigail Croydon, Janet Fennell, Nora Tomlinson, Stephen Regan, Jane de Gay, Mags Noble and Carole Brown; and to Professor Judie Newman, External Assessor.

This book is dedicated to the memory of Elizabeth Howe.

Lizbeth Goodman

Keynotes

... Indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman.

Virginia Woolf, 1929

There I was trying to connect with all these writers who really never saw me. They were unable to see me, actually My experience is that it's when you're with your own people that you are most yourself; you have more of a context. So though I love the Brontës, and some of the white writers I read, still I knew that I had a tradition ... that could help me.

Alice Walker, 1986

An Obstacle

I was climbing up a mountain-path
With many things to do,
Important business of my own,
And other people's too,
When I ran against a Prejudice
That quite cut off the view.

My work was such as could not wait,
My path quite clearly showed,
My strength and time were limited,
I carried quite a load;
And there that hulking Prejudice
Sat all across the road.

So I spoke to him politely,
For he was huge and high,
And begged that he would move a bit
And let me travel by.
He smiled, but as for moving! –
He didn't even try.

And then I reasoned quietly
With that colossal mule:
My time was short – no other path –
The mountain winds were cool.
I argued like a Solomon;
He sat there like a fool.

Then I flew into a passion.
And I danced and howled and swore.
I pelted and belabored him
Till I was stiff and sore;
He got as mad as I did –
But he sat there as before.

And then I begged him on my knees;
I might be kneeling still
If so I hoped to move that mass
Of obdurate ill-will –
As well invite the monument
To vacate Bunker Hill!

So I sat before him helpless,
In an ecstasy of woe –
The mountain mists were rising fast,
The sun was sinking slow –
When a sudden inspiration came,
As sudden winds do blow.

I took my hat, I took my stick,
My load I settled fair,
I approached that awful incubus
With an absent-minded air –
And I walked directly through him,
As if he wasn't there!

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935)
© The Feminist Press, 1992

Introduction: gender as an approach to literature

The title of this book has been carefully chosen to reflect its content, and its purpose as one of a series of books on 'Approaching Literature'. The word 'literature' has priority in the title for good reason. The emphasis in this book is on reading and analysing literature: the context and circumstances of its writing; the points of view of its authors; the processes of reading and of interpreting texts. The second term, 'gender', indicates the book's focus. Two central questions are raised throughout: What does awareness of gender contribute to a reading of literature? What does an understanding of literature say about gender in literature and society?

To consider these questions, we need to define some terms. The following definitions are challenged and qualified in this book, but they do provide useful handles.

Literature can be defined as a body of writing that aims to be creative. It includes poetry, prose fiction and drama, but usually excludes shopping lists, business letters and newspaper journalism, for instance.

Genre is a key term used to distinguish between distinct types of writing (or art, or thought). In this book, it refers to the three major forms of literature, or 'literary genres': poetry, prose fiction and drama (including play texts and performances).

So, 'literature' includes forms of writing which deliberately and creatively experiment with language in order to suggest images and ideas which engage the reader's imagination. The spacing of poetry on the page may suggest a shape; the rhyme and rhythm may create a mood. The narrators and characters of prose fiction (short stories, novellas and novels) allow readers to enter fictional worlds by identifying with other people, perspectives and ideas. The dialogue and stage directions of dramatic texts represent a three-dimensional story which readers can engage with and even 'perform'. All this work involves imagination and interpretation.

Imagination and interpretation are also central to the discussion of literature and gender in a more specific sense.

Gender refers to ways of seeing and representing people and situations based on sex difference. By contrast, 'sex' is a biological category: female or male. The term 'sexuality' refers to the realm of sexual experience and desire – sometimes it refers to a person's sexual orientation (as heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual). 'Gender' is a social or cultural category, influenced by stereotypes about 'female' and 'male' behaviour that exist in our attitudes and beliefs. Such beliefs are often said to be 'culturally produced' or 'constructed'.

So, when we refer to the study of literature and gender, we don't just mean literary analysis of texts with regard to the sex (female or male) or sexuality of authors, but the wider study of literary texts as they are written, read and interpreted within cultures, by women and men. We are all aware of some degree of cultural stereotyping about gender. For instance, many of us will be familiar with the Western tradition of designating colours to signify sex difference: 'pink for girls, blue for boys'. In providing visual

symbols for sex difference, we allow for imaginative and interpretative associations attached to those colours: pink perhaps suggesting softness and 'girlishness' and blue suggesting 'boyishness'. While the designations 'female' and 'male' are sex categories, the imaginative ideas associated with these differences include a range of cultural and individualized ideas about gender. Preconceptions about gender might include the idea that 'women drivers' are in some way less able than 'drivers' (assumed to be male), or the notion that 'big boys don't cry'. Further examples might include giving boys bigger portions of food or giving boys trucks rather than dolls as gifts. In the world of work, there is the gendered division of labour, characterized by a striking male domination of high status, highly paid areas of work. So, gender can be read in sexual stereotypes and in power relations between individuals and groups. In the process of studying these phenomena, we engage with symbolic ideas attached to sex difference (colours, ideas, images) which involve our imaginations and interpretative skills. If we read with concern for identifying assumptions and stereotypes about gender, we learn about society as well as about literature.

This book views the study of literature as a process with a connection to you, the reader. Like the authors you will study, you too live in particular cultures, in particular places and periods, with ideas, prejudices and desires of your own. Your role as reader is active, and it is 'positioned', or influenced, by a range of factors such as your gender, age, race and class. Just as the 'positions' of authors may influence their choice of subject-matter and styles of writing, your position as reader will affect your interpretation. So will your position as a reader of this textbook, as a student. This book acknowledges the collaborative and personalized nature of reading, and also encourages you to think critically about that process as you proceed.

In this book, we will read literature with 'gender on the agenda'. This is a shorthand phrase for the process of reading with a concern for gender issues that affect the writing and reading of texts. For instance, it means paying attention to factors such as women's relative lack of access to higher education (particularly in previous generations), women's lower economic status, women's domestic responsibilities and the conflict between nurturing roles such as motherhood and domestic work (areas which have traditionally been undervalued) and other areas of creative work. Areas of activity which have traditionally been valued highly have also been seen – not coincidentally – primarily as 'men's work': for example, writing; thinking; making an impact in the artistic and critical domains. This book takes the view that reading with 'gender on the agenda' is a vital part of the reading and studying of literature and cultural representations.

Reading with 'gender on the agenda' offers one way of focusing on literary texts. It encourages us to see aspects of the texts and the contexts of their creation and reception which we might not otherwise notice. You may find it difficult to 'read gender' at first. It might seem awkward, or seem to obscure the other aspects of the text. But once you get used to paying attention to gender in literature, it's a bit like wearing a new pair of glasses: suddenly you notice all kinds of things you hadn't noticed before. This enhanced vision does not stop you seeing all you previously saw, but

rather enlarges your scope of vision and intensifies and enriches the experience of seeing or reading.

While we'll be paying particular attention to your role as reader of this book, we won't treat the process of 'reading gender' like a personality test or measure of the 'political correctness' of you, the reader, or of the author of any text. Reading literature involves interpretation, but we are concerned with texts and their contexts, not with the reader's personality or politics in their own right. We are interested in the gender dynamics to be gleaned from a study of texts in context.

Firing the canon

The literary 'canon' is the body of writings generally recognized as 'great' by some 'authority'. For instance, any university reading list will tend to include a body of work deemed 'great' or 'classic' or important enough to teach from generation to generation. From Greek drama to Chaucer, Shakespeare to the Realist novel to Romantic writing, different bodies of literature have been valued according to criteria of 'aesthetic worth', and according to the tastes and values of individuals in positions of authority within academic institutions. The process of choosing 'great texts' for inclusion in the literary canon involves a set of assumptions about what makes literature great. For Plato, there was one measure, for Shakespeare, another. Most literature textbooks until very recently focused primarily or exclusively on men's writing. In so doing, men's writing (and nearly always white, middle-class men's writing in English) was positioned as 'the norm', presented as if it were Literature, with a capital 'L', somehow representative of all 'great writing'. By not considering gender, such textbooks made and conveyed the assumption that the male is somehow generic or neutral, an assumption shown to be false by a focus on women's writing.

This book challenges the traditional notion of the 'canon' by considering a range of texts, mostly by women. We take the view that gender is an important area of study, and one which adds to the study of literature by offering a number of ways of evaluating 'literary worth'. For instance, a focus on gender may lead to examination of connections between literature and life, fiction and (auto)biography, characters and 'real people'. It may lead to the study of literature written by, as well as about, women. When we shift focus to these aspects of literature, we begin to choose new texts for inclusion in a possible alternative canon: perhaps including Aphra Behn alongside Shakespeare, Caryl Churchill alongside Ibsen, Alice Walker alongside William Faulkner.

In recent years, academic institutions have witnessed just this shift, which may be referred to as a 'firing of the canon': a re-evaluation of the standards by which authors and texts have been singled out and 'canonized', followed by an active search for other authors and texts for inclusion. This search may lead to previously 'hidden' texts by women, people of colour and working-class writers, and by authors working in many languages. Reading and studying literature today is, therefore, a very rich and multi-layered enterprise. It involves imagination and interpretation

in the process of judging the merit of literature on artistic and also social grounds, recognizing the subjective nature of any value judgement. Today, we may find value in some stories, poems and plays which don't fit any of the previously agreed guidelines for canonization. So it should be: each generation re-evaluates its position in relation to history and the ideas of previous generations.

Like all books, this book includes some authors and texts to the exclusion of others, offering its own 'canon' of sorts. The texts discussed in these pages are all accessible to you. They are either included in this volume, or are widely available in inexpensive paperback editions and libraries. You can and should read the literature first, and then read the teaching material of this book alongside it, as a guide and companion to your reading. The book includes exercises which direct your attention to particular texts, ideas and ways of reading, as you go along. But of course, it is true that the choice of texts included in this book, like any choice of 'set texts', has involved a process of valuing and decision making – one influenced by the advancements of what has been called 'the feminist literary critical revolution'.

Feminist literary critics have been among the main opponents of the traditional male-dominated canon. Let's define our terms.

Feminism is a politics: a recognition of the historical and cultural subordination of women (the only world-wide majority to be treated as a minority), and a resolve to do something about it. Feminist thought has developed since the dramatic interventions of the Suffrage Era, when those who believed in fighting for women's rights rallied around one central cause, women's right to vote. 'Votes for women' is a phrase designating a social cause; it is also the title of a play by Elizabeth Robins, performed in England in 1907. The battle for the vote was fought in all manner of public spaces, in the theatre, the streets and political platforms. The Suffragists are often referred to as the 'first wave' of modern feminism; the 'second wave' is generally held to have begun in the late 1960s, when political upheaval in England, Europe and America began to focus particularly on women's rights.

Much has been written about the modern movement for 'Women's Liberation', about the many different schools of feminism and the divisions and allegiances between them. Feminism has always incorporated a concern for ideas and 'consciousness raising', while also acting in the public sphere to improve the situation of women's lives. In the field of literature, feminist thought has been very influential; it has pointed out the historical 'silences' of women authors not included in the 'canon'; it has 'fired the canon' in order to shake up static views about women's creative work and domestic roles, enabling women's literature to be published, read and assessed by contemporary scholars and students. It has helped to reform the gendering of social life and has influenced popular culture to the extent that Women's Studies and the associated field of Gender Studies are now accepted areas of study and research at many levels. Indeed, any general academic course on literature which did not deal at an integral level with issues of gender would now seem outdated and unbalanced.

Here, it is useful to note the distinction between Women's Studies and Gender Studies. Courses in **Women's Studies** are concerned with the

representation, rights and status of women. Courses in **Gender Studies** are concerned with the representation, rights and status of women and men. This book deals with gender, but focuses primarily on women. This is partly because Gender Studies have developed in the wake of Women's Studies, and partly because readers and students of literature are overwhelmingly female, even though the position of women authors has traditionally been marginal.

There are now many books on the market about feminist literary criticism and feminist literature. (Some of these are excellent and are indeed recommended as further readings at the end of this book.) The two phrases need unpacking.

Feminist literary criticism is an academic approach to the study of literature which applies feminist thought to the analysis of literary texts and the contexts of their production and reception. It has developed in recent years into a fascinating and highly specialized field with a language, set of theories and a vocabulary all its own. Early 'European' feminist theoretical writings began with the work of Simone de Beauvoir, while 'Anglo-American' writing is often associated with Virginia Woolf.



Virginia Woolf in 1932. Hulton Deutsch Collection.



Simone de Beauvoir in 1947. Hulton Deutsch Collection.

Feminist Literature is written by contemporary women within the context of 'second wave' or even 'third wave' (that is, current) contexts of feminist awareness. Feminist authors' have a political agenda in the writing of their work. So, labelling literature as 'feminist' requires some knowledge of the author's intentions. The distinction between literature that can be read and interpreted as feminist, and literature that is intended by its authors to be feminist, is a thorny issue, and one that is addressed later in

this book. Literature may have a feminist impact even if its authors do not identify themselves as feminist. For instance, some women's literature conveys feminist ideas and affects readers in a 'consciousness-raising' style. It is also important to remember that virtually all authors writing today have been influenced to some degree by the 'feminist literary critical revolution', at least to the extent that the idea of feminism is now recognized as a significant influence in our culture. Most of this book does not deal with 'feminist literature' as such. It is concerned with literature that represents gender in particular ways: it has 'gender on the agenda'.

Approaching this book: keynotes and concerns

Virginia Woolf's 'keynote' to this book reminds us that many women wrote in previous generations, but that social factors to do with gender kept many writers 'anonymous', hidden, silenced or otherwise excluded from the 'canon'. Alice Walker's 'keynote' quotation reminds us that race is also a factor keeping women writers isolated, unrecognized and even – to borrow and expand on her metaphor – invisible. When focus is shifted from the centre (the 'canon') to the margins (that which has traditionally been excluded from the 'canon' or left unattributed), a very different picture of 'what literature is' begins to form. So, although this book is concerned with literature and gender, and not exclusively with women's writing, we must consider the social and cultural conditions of writing, which are affected in important ways by gender, race and class. Here, the third and last 'keynote' of this book, the poem 'An Obstacle', by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, can be read as a poem about the 'obstacles' of gender stereotypes and prejudices which blocked the progress of women writers for so long.

These keynotes are 'tasters' of the many and varied arguments put by women writers over the years. Indeed, a great deal has been written about the obstacles faced by women authors in previous generations. Today women writers – at least in the West – have a much more constructive context in which to work; not only is writing an 'acceptable' occupation for women, but it has now been widely recognized that women contribute a great deal to the body of literature and to the body of literary criticism. When women write from a contemporary Western perspective, as do authors such as Alice Walker and Jamaica Kincaid, they work within a cultural context liberated to some extent by feminist approaches to literature. Then, of course, the author's individual position within her culture comes into play. Gender becomes visible as a factor in the writing, reading and interpreting of literature, as do factors such as race and class.

The literary texts chosen for study have been selected with two primary considerations in mind: a concern to keep the amount of reading to a reasonable level (so that your study will be challenging but not unmanageable), and a desire to provide an original and engaging range of literary styles and pieces. A combination of 'classics' or canonical works are discussed alongside a range of lesser-known works. This list includes texts which deal with race, class, gender and sexuality. They are by black and white authors, most of them women, most of them British and American. The inclusion of a body of nineteenth-century literature is meant to be



Jamaica Kincaid. Reproduced by
courtesy of Virago Press.

provocative, for it is more common to discuss gender with regard to contemporary texts, written in the context of contemporary debates about feminism and representation. But we have used a selection of nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts to show how gender is relevant in different periods, and need not be confined to the analysis of modern women's writing. This range of work from different periods allows us to illustrate the importance of feminist concerns in the contemporary work we do include: for instance, in a selection of contemporary poetry, in the novel *The Color Purple* and in Caryl Churchill's play *Top Girls*.

Each of the eight chapters takes a distinct approach, covering all three major genres. Some chapters include extracts from key critical essays in the field, in order to provide practice in engaging with literary criticism and applying it to the reading of literature.

While only one chapter has been designed specifically to deal with a 'thematic' approach to literature ('women and madness'), it might be said that approaching literature through gender is itself a thematic approach. It is certainly true that reading literature with 'gender on the agenda' brings certain aspects of literary texts to the fore. For instance, women authors tend to be included, women characters take on special significance and relationships between women and men become central to the process of understanding other relationships within texts. In addition, a few themes surface repeatedly: motherhood; domestic responsibility; conflicts in women's lives; power relationships between the sexes (including those between women and other women, men and other men); and conflicts between private and public roles and responsibilities. Domestic fiction is a category or 'subgenre' covered throughout this book, first with reference to

traditional representations of women's roles in the home, and then with reference to the feminist writing which challenged and continues to challenge such traditions. A concern for appearance, dictated by norms of 'feminine attire' and internalized so that it affects women's ways of seeing themselves, is a theme which recurs with compelling frequency.

You can expect these and other themes to develop and overlap in the discussion of literature and gender. Patterns will emerge. Pieces will fall into place, though the overall 'picture' will look different to each of you.

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Literature and gender

by *Lizbeth Goodman with Alison Smith*

Jumping to conclusions: authors, readers and texts

Approaching literature through gender

In the Introduction, we argued that reading 'with gender on the agenda' involves you, the reader, in an active process of imagination and interpretation. We've also alerted you to the need to look beyond a text to consider its context and its relevance to gender issues in society as well as in literature. Let's start by reading and interpreting a literary text which you've already encountered in the 'keywords' to this book: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's poem, 'An Obstacle'.

Please read 'An Obstacle' once, and then again. Consider the following questions: **Is the narrator (speaking voice) male or female? What is the 'Prejudice' which the narrator describes?**

D i s c u s s i o n

The narrator of the poem seems to be female. In fact, it would be fair to say that the poem not only provides clues about the narrator's sex, but also that the narrator recognizes a gendered dimension to her experience of the world: she comments on herself in relation to the 'Prejudice', gendered male, which blocks her path. The poem is written in the first person voice, and the narrator is referred to as 'I'. This stylistic technique creates the impression of a bond between the narrator and the author of the poem. While such a bond may not exist, this poem implies that the narrator (and perhaps also the author) has experienced a lack of co-operation and support from the social world, characterized by 'Prejudice'. The poem may, in fact, be read as a general comment on the state of gender relations in the social world: women striving to move ahead, patriarchal attitudes standing in the way. ■

Of course, this interpretation of the poem may differ from yours, partly because you have not been provided with contextual clues to help you to decipher the text. The choice of this poem as one of the book's 'keynotes' signals a likelihood that it is a text 'to do with gender'. In fact, the poem is appropriate to this book in a number of ways. It is little known, certainly not 'canonical' in any sense. It is written by a woman whose work was respected in its day and has recently once again come to public attention, largely due to the efforts of feminist scholars. It presents as its central metaphor 'Prejudice': one of the biggest problems facing women writers in any period, and indeed facing all writers who do not conform to some 'norm' of acceptability or importance. (The same might also apply to a black writer such as Jamaica Kincaid, or a gay male writer such as Oscar Wilde.) The poem introduces many of the key themes of this book, and