FEMINIST LITERARY STUDIES

An Introduction

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Feminist literary studies: an introduction

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Preface

This book is based on seminars conducted with students who took the opportunity, in their final year of study for an Honours degree in English language and literature, to examine some influential styles of critical discourse developed over the last fifteen years or so, among them feminist criticism. The aim was to identify some characteristic features of various types of literary criticism which are called feminist, and to see how they relate not only to one another but also – by means of assimilation or opposition – to recent and current 'non-feminist' criticism. The book is written accordingly from inside English studies, and concerns itself with feminist ideologies only in so far as these result in literary critical practices which, collectively, constitute a major critique of 'Eng. Lit.' as an academic subject.

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K. K. RUTHVEN

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1

The gendering of critical discourse

Where to begin is always a problem when writing a book, but particularly a book about feminist criticism, especially if you happen to be a man. The reason for this is that feminist theory has politicised all the usual manoeuvres engaged in by men who write books about books, so that whatever they do is likely to be considered symptomatic of the problem of male domination to which feminists address themselves. If you are a man and you decide (as I have done) to take a look at feminist criticism, you may find yourself at risk from a feminist mode of cinematic discourse which categorises 'looking' as a morbid activity engaged in by men to the detriment of women, who are reduced consequently to mere objects of voyeuristic attention.[1] To want to 'look' at feminist criticism, therefore, is only what you would expect of a man in a male-dominated society, for in doing so he simply complies with the rules of a symbolic order of representation which displays women's ideas in the same way that films and girlie magazines display their bodies, and for the same purposes: vulgar curiosity and the arousal of desire.

Such modes of representation are sometimes called 'androcentric' because they are centred on men (Greek *andros*, 'male'), and sometimes 'phallocentric', partly because in most systems of sexual differentiation the phallus is taken to be the principal signifier of the male, and partly because of the special significance attached to it in psychoanalytic theory, the details of which I shall describe later. But in so far as possession of a phallus entails possession of power in a phallocentric society, the term used by most feminists to describe a symbolic order of representation which is also male-specific is 'phallocratic' (Greek *kratos*, 'power'). And the social system which corresponds to such a phallocratic order – a system which enables men to dominate women in all social relations – is known in feminist discourse as 'patriarchy', a term which some feminists find unhelpfully vague, but which continues to be used because no satisfactory

alternative is available. The oppressive effects of patriarchal domination manifest themselves as 'sexism'.

It is believed that in the phallocratic order of knowledge perpetuated in our patriarchal society, the kind of looking which results in 'knowing' is likely to be exploitative. For knowledge is treated as something quite separate from the knower, and as capable of being known 'objectively', provided the knower aspires to 'impersonality', separating self from object in order to give the self power over objects. Men see knowledge, in other words, as something to be 'mastered' in the way that women are to be mastered. And therefore any thoroughgoing critique of the phallocratic oppression of women must begin by recognising that the cult of so-called objective and impersonal modes of knowing makes what we call 'knowledge' complicit in that oppression. Any man who tries to 'master' the texts of feminism is guilty of replicating at the level of discourse those oppressive practices which enable men to subordinate and manipulate women. A passion for mastery results in the molestation or rape of whatever it subordinates: symbolically, it is a phallic activity, whether it is practised by men who do it 'naturally', or by women who can be trained to do it in a patriarchal system of education.

I mention such general objections to the writing of books by men on feminist topics because they function rhetorically to dissuade men from entering the debate on the grounds that they are somehow disqualified from doing so. This is a new experience for most men. And while it may be said that it will do them good to feel excluded for a change (because women have always felt excluded by non-feminist criticism) I think the long-term effects of exclusionism are bad. Literary criticism thrives on provocation and dissent, and its renovation depends on the discovery of new questions with which to interrogate books and ways of talking about them. Feminism is well stocked with such questions. But as the history of early Freudian criticism shows, people become impatient with the tactic of attempting to stifle dissent by claiming that objections to cherished theories and procedures are merely symptomatic of the problem (I am recalling the days when, unless you conceded the 'fact' that an umbrella is a phallic symbol, you could be accused of being too inhibited to notice such things). Given a false choice between being considered symptomatic and being silent, you have to opt for being considered symptomatic in order to make any critical remarks at all in what has been constructed as a no-win situation. The male explorer of feminist criticism is always falling into similar traps. Certain features

of this discourse, for instance, have not yet been labelled, and therefore in thinking about them I am tempted to invent names for them – as French feminists do – so that they can be recognised and described. But to do so would be to slip once more into phallocratic bad habits, colonising the new space which women have made for themselves by sticking male signposts up all over the place. For as Mary Daly keeps reminding us, the power of naming was conferred by God on Adam but not on Eve, and in naming the animals Adam took dominion over them.[2] In Daly's terms, women will remain powerless until they themselves exercise the power of naming.

The tactic of attempting to discredit books like this before they ever get written is therefore one which I am obliged to ignore, for to capitulate to it would be to deny the possibility of saying anything at all about the nature and development of feminist criticism. If that seems an arbitrary attitude to adopt, it is worth remembering that this is what happens whenever criticism gets itself into an impasse, as most recently in the case of deconstruction. Instead of trying to theorise themselves out of trouble on such occasions, critics escape the consequences of their own arguments by resorting to a common sense which is widely disparaged nowadays at the highest levels of criticism. Books about deconstruction, for example, ought to be a contradiction in terms, in so far as deconstructionists claim that the duplicitous nature of language makes stable meanings impossible; but that has not prevented the publication of lucid accounts of deconstructionist theory and practice, a feat which can be achieved only by ignoring the language-scepticism which is so strikingly characteristic of deconstructionist criticism, and acting as if the figural indeterminacies which haunt the languages of literature and of criticism do not affect the language of 'metacriticism', the criticism of criticism.[3] Similarly, in order to proceed I am obliged to ignore those features of my own text which a feminist critique of it might deem phallocratic, such as its reduction of different kinds of feminist criticism to an ordered set of discursive positions. To act otherwise would involve writing a book about whether men can write books about feminist criticism. And who would want to read that, even if I could write it? In other words, although it is pertinent to raise questions of discourse and authority in connection with a book written by a man about a body of criticism produced mainly by women, I am not convinced that the question itself constitutes a wholly disabling objection to the procedure I follow here. Briefly, this is to look closely and critically at those critical theories and

practices which are called feminist, and which were both focused and catalysed by the publication of Kate Millett's *Sexual politics* in 1970. As for the possibility that in doing so I risk being charged with hermeneutical rape, I take heart from Jane Gallop's observation that there are more ways than one to have intercourse with textual bodies, and that in the kind to which we should all, men as well as women, aspire, 'entry and interpenetration do not mean disrespect or violation'.[4]

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'Feminist literary criticism' is a familiar enough term: we use it all the time, but what does it mean? Each of its constituent words is highly problematic. For instance, to which of the many feminisms, ancient and modern, does 'feminist' refer? What does the word 'literary' mean, now that literature is said to be no longer the generic term for a diversity of texts bonded into a canon by an elusive property called 'literariness', but rather the product of categorising acts which result in some texts being declared 'literature' and others not – acts which serve some people's interests more than others', and are therefore political in nature? And as for 'criticism', is the word being used in the older sense of a variety of discursive practices subservient to the elucidation and evaluation of works of literature? Or is it being used in the newer sense of a discourse which uses literary texts – if at all – only as occasions which prompt further theorising, thus establishing criticism as a primary mode of writing like poetry and fiction, and not a merely 'secondary' commentary upon such allegedly primary modes? 'Feminist literary criticism', in other words, is a deceptively serene label for the contestations it identifies, and the turbulence created by the collocation of those three vexed words would be signalled much more clearly if we were to write it as 'feminist' 'literary' 'criticism'. But that would not solve the further problem of whether it should be kept as a separate entity attached to a particular subject-discipline (such as English studies) or whether it should be subsumed into the cross-disciplinary institution of 'feminist criticism', one of whose interests will continue to be literature for as long as literary studies last, but which is already prepared for the day – should it ever arrive – when literature is annexed by cultural studies and has to vie for attention alongside more popular signifying practices such as films and television.

The radical critique of literary studies which has been going on since the late 1960s has not been so successful as to support unequivocally the claim that the end is nigh, and that the study of literature (in the highbrow sense: Literature) is finished. Notoriously, the institution of literary studies copes with radical critiques of its activities by coming to terms with them. This is a residual problem for radical critics, who object to having their discourse 'appropriated' by the academy. The academy, however, claims to be merely 'accommodating' such discourses. Clearly, how you see it depends on where you are standing. Radicals oppose the academy and its practices as a manifestation of an establishment they want to see changed. But in so far as most radicals pass through the academy, and some end up employed there, they are bound to be treated by the academy, however reluctantly, as its avant-garde – prodigal sons and daughters whose outrageous goings-on result eventually in modifications to institutional practices, specifically in a revised view of what the object of enquiry ought to be and what might be the best ways of dealing with it.

As an institution, literary criticism develops and survives by such processes of accommodation. It is interested in the new rather as a means of transforming than supplanting the old. Its methodological incoherence is a scandal only to those who wish to replace it by something else, and who therefore seek out some 'central' set of assumptions which, if discredited, would bring the whole edifice tumbling down. But the institution of literary criticism tolerates a great variety of practices whose only relationship with one another is contiguity. Some practitioners are self-conscious about what they are doing, and others are not, but all have a sense – exaggerated in the eyes of some of the others – of their own importance, and work hard at refining their practices. The advent of the new affects some practices more than others and may result in intramural debates, often conducted in that highly articulate style of acrimony which literary people are particularly good at; but eventually the new gets accommodated somewhere in the system, and is tolerated by the rest to the extent that they stop objecting to it and get on with what they consider to be their own more worthwhile work. One of the reasons for this is that the new, like the old, is never a singularity but always an amalgam of diversities, different bits of which are likely to appeal to different parts of the institution which does the accommodating. The institution of criticism is not so much a fortress which feminists have to storm but rather a building with many apartments, the doors to some

of which are open to some kinds of feminist. Nobody doubts the existence of a siege mentality towards any kind of feminism in certain quarters of the institution; but at the same time, it has to be conceded that some feminists, like some marxists, exaggerate the difficulties of their task in order to develop in one another a sense of heroic solidarity in the face of overwhelming odds.

How you see the relationship between feminist discourse and literature depends therefore on whether you believe feminism can or should be contained within the institution of literary studies. If it can, then our business is to learn from feminist criticism how to improve the study of English language and literature, specifically by removing from it those procedures which are vulnerable to a feminist critique, or modifying them (as in the case of canon-formation) in such a way as to take account of that critique. If it cannot, then nothing short of a cultural revolution will suffice, involving a total transformation of society and its institutions, including the academies. 'The feminist project is to end male domination', writes Andrea Dworkin. 'In order to do this, we will have to destroy the structure of culture as we know it, its art, its churches, its laws; its nuclear families based on father-right and nation-states; all of the images, institutions, customs, and habits which define women as worthless and invisible victims.'[5] But the prospects for a sexual revolution along the lines of China's short-lived cultural revolution are slight; and given that the appropriation/accommodation of feminist discourse by English studies is already under way, the relation of feminism to literary studies would seem obliged at the moment to take the form of negotiation rather than confrontation. It is going to be no more difficult for the academies to learn to live with feminism than it has been for them to learn to live with marxism.

The principal problem posed by the emergence of feminist literary criticism is the pedagogical one. For the majority of people in the teaching profession this comes down to determining the best way of accommodating the discourse of feminism into that babble of heterogeneous discourses created by traditional voices vying with newer accents. It may be objected, and rightly, that there is more to feminism than pedagogy, and that the aim of a feminist criticism as of any revolutionary criticism should be to subvert the dominant discourses, not to make compromises with them. Each of these observations, and others like them, could be taken as the starting-point for a very different kind of book from this one, which I have chosen

to write partly because I lacked the inclination (and in some cases the ability) to write any of the others, and partly because the intervention of feminism in English studies – which is taught, problematically, largely by men largely to women – is an important moment in the history of feminism as well as in the history of English studies. It was never suggested to male teachers who completed their formal education before the late 1960s that feminism might be even remotely relevant to the teaching of English. The result was that when feminist criticism finally presented itself to men already in the profession it was construed as merely supplementary to what needed to be known. What was called (misleadingly) the 'feminist perspective' was imagined to be something which trendies would take up and troglodites put down, and which the rest of us might mention from time to time if it seemed relevant to the interpretation of a particular text. But feminism claims to be much more than a perspective, and the growing volume, sophistication and acuteness of feminist literary criticism – together with its strategic alliance with the most disruptive critical theories of our time – have placed it at the centre of critiques of English studies as traditionally conceived. The feminist intervention strikes me as being incontestably the most important challenge faced by English studies in the twenty or more years I have been associated with it. This does not mean that I approve unreservedly of the way it goes about its business, for it is excessively fond of 'underdetermined' theories which impose a feminist interpretation on data which can be interpreted equally well by alternative and non-feminist theories. But I think men should be encouraged to engage in feminist criticism less self-consciously than they are obliged to do at present. 'If . . . feminist literary study has profoundly revolutionary implications for literary study as a whole', William W. Morgan remarked in a 1976 exchange with Annette Kolodny, 'then, in some sense, it's everybody's business.'[6] That strikes me as a responsible attitude to take, and one which all men in the teaching profession should adopt, provided they bear in mind Morgan's caveat and are careful to speak '*about* feminist literary thinkers and not *for* them'. Some women think even so small a liberty is excessive. So before proceeding further we should consider why they do so, and what grounds there are for opposing the exclusionist argument that men should keep out of feminist criticism.

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Men who get into arguments with women about feminist criticism are often given the impression that they are disqualified from doing so simply because they are men. I find the objection puzzling, given the fact that feminists have put a great deal of effort into explaining the differences between sex and gender, the former being a biological category, and the latter (in Sally McConnell-Ginet's neat definition) 'the cultural meaning attached to sexual identity'.[7] The purpose of making this distinction has been to free women (but inevitably men too) from sexist stereotyping based on limiting conceptions of their 'nature'; and the upshot has been a discrediting of essentialistic theories of human behaviour which designate certain characteristics as male-specific and others as female-specific. Consequently, the sense of 'being a woman' cannot be treated as if it were a pre-constructed given – and therefore a source of incontestable authority to be appealed to when the going gets rough in arguments with men – because (like the sense of 'being a man') it is merely the product of sex-coding processes of acculturation. So to hear a woman say that a true understanding of feminist criticism calls for an inwardness beyond the reach of any man sounds like a regression to the bad old days when women had intuition and men had to make do with brains.

There are in fact many ways of discrediting men who elect to comment on matters of concern to women, ranging from vulgar put-downs ('What would a bloody man know about it?') to high-falutin psychoanalytic talk about the impropriety of thrusting the discourse of the Father into places where it is not welcome. The real cause of concern is that men might react negatively to feminist criticism, thus making the 'natural' progression from suspect males to enemies of the movement. Yet it seems to me that whatever else feminism might be, and whatever ends it might think of itself as serving, by the time it enters literary studies as critical discourse it is just one more way of talking about books. As such it must undergo the kind of inspection made sooner or later of every type of critical discourse, each of which has its own aetiology and aims, distinctive features and operational procedures, all of which can be described and assessed for the insights they yield. Now this is not the attitude commonly taken by men who move into the feminist domain and are fortunate enough to be tolerated there. Why they should want to get involved in such a trouble-spot is of course puzzling to many people, men as well as women. Most men

who write feminist criticism are professed radicals with a passion for oppositional discourse, and who see radical feminism as a moment of exemplary resistance to an oppressive regime. Personal relationships with feminist women aside, their attitude to feminism is one of commitment rather than curiosity, and they take it up not for something to do but as something that needs to be done. They maintain their credibility by contributing ideological expertise and rhetorical skills towards the construction of a feminist critique which will not be vulnerable to attacks by antifeminists or the corrosions of scepticism. Their response to the challenge of feminism is admirable, for by taking a supportive role in its activities they are doing something positive by way of compensation for the scandal of left-wing male indifference to the women's movement in the sixties.

Nevertheless, I object to a strategy which situates men in such a way that the only speaking positions available to them are those of tame feminist or wild antifeminist. Neither accommodates my own experience as a reader of feminist criticism, which, put briefly, is that the theory is more impressive than some of the practices. For if you are persuaded by what I take to be the central hypothesis of feminist literary criticism – that gender is a crucial determinant in the production, circulation and consumption of literary discourses – and if in addition you feel (as I do) that some of the evidence adduced in support of that hypothesis looks rigged, then inevitably you will find yourself wanting to occupy that discursive space already mapped out by Janet Radcliffe Richards in *The sceptical feminist* (Harmondsworth, 1980). The gist of that book is that a much better case can be made out for feminism than many feminists have succeeded in making. And the corollary of this is that just as language is too important a phenomenon to be turned over entirely to certain types of linguist, so the female 'problematic' (the questions asked of the evidence) is too important to be left in the hands of anti-intellectual feminists, whether vulgarians ('Now don't try to reason with *me*') or highbrows who believe that the construction of logical arguments and verification procedures for handling evidence can be dispensed with, on the grounds that such things are coded as masculine in our society and are therefore quite irrelevant to the discussion and analysis of purely female 'experience'.

The exclusionist view that feminist criticism is essentially women's work and should remain so originates in a separatist conception of the subject wholly at odds with the conditions in which feminist discourses

circulate. For even when written by and purportedly for women, feminist literary criticism is read also by men who make a living from talking about books. No teacher of literary studies can afford to ignore feminist contributions to marxist-based critiques of the institutionalisation of literature, particularly the indictment of androcentricity as manifested by the preponderance of male authors on academic syllabuses. Indeed, any man who wanted to ignore it would find it difficult to do so, since feminist criticism turns up in many places other than feminist journals, and feminist presses are not the only ones to publish feminist books. If he is resolute in his machismo, none of it will have much effect on him, although he may find himself becoming more circumspect in what he says about women writers and women critics, unless he is the sort of man who takes pleasure in parading himself as the last unregenerate sexist in a world of wimps. For many men, however, the feminist critique of gender is intellectually disturbing (how could men have been so blind?) and a source of shame and guilt (after such knowledge, what forgiveness?). Even in its milder forms, feminist discourse strikes men as being accusatory, as it is meant to do; and in its most uncompromising manifestations it is unrelentingly intimidatory.

Feminist terrorism is a mirror image of machismo. Unregenerately separatist – men are the problem, so how could they possibly be part of the solution? – it offers the vicarious satisfactions of retaliation and reprisal in a war of the sexes for which the only acceptable end is unconditional surrender of all power to women. Terrorism polarises the sexes in such a way that men must either ignore feminism or attack it, thus 'proving' by such negative actions that women have nothing to gain from listening to moderates and gradualists who believe that inequality is not an eternal and immutable consequence of relations between the sexes, but rather the product of a particular construction of those relations which can and must be remodelled in such a way that neither sex will feel dominated by the other. By contrast with terrorism, therefore, the *j'accuserie* of moderatism is at least negotiable, although even here the options for a man are still limited, unless he is willing to reconstruct himself as a convert and offer to expiate his guilt by becoming that singular anomaly, the male feminist or (to use a less contentious term) pro-feminist male. Nevertheless, it is still said that sympathetic men who understand what feminism is about will have the sense to let women get on with it by themselves; that because men are accustomed to running things, they would take over feminism if given

half the chance, their appropriation of it thus constituting yet another form of oppression – 'giving' women what is theirs by right; that men who display no wish to appropriate feminism may well be motivated by an unconscious desire to subvert it; and that academic men who profess to take an 'interest' in feminism (and turn out to have similar 'interests' in marxism, psychoanalysis and so forth) will blunt the cutting edge of its radicalism by academicising it, converting it into an optional 'approach' to literature and offering it as something at once novel and 'relevant' to students bored with traditional approaches.

These arguments can be mounted more persuasively than my crude summary of them might suggest, but all of them are weakened by the fact that even this most recent of feminisms is heavily dependent on men to articulate its position, and continues to co-opt their services. In matters of theory, John Stuart Mill's *The subjection of women* (1869) and Friedrich Engels' *The origin of the family, private property and the state* (1884) are still treated as classic texts, and current feminist criticism would be inconceivable without Michel Foucault's work on discursive formations, the semiology of Roland Barthes, the deconstruction of Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan's imbrication of psychoanalysis with linguistics. In addition to these major contributions by male theorists towards the mobilising of feminist criticism, there is the exemplary feminism of various male writers who succeeded in not being prisoners of their sex. These include Samuel Richardson, a radical feminist in comparison with a male chauvinist like Henry Fielding, and whose *Clarissa* is now being presented to us as 'arguably the major feminist text of the language';[8] Henrik Ibsen, who in such plays as *A doll's house* (1879) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890) embodies the frustrations and tragedy of women trapped in the conventions of a patriarchal society; George Bernard Shaw, who thought a man was simply a woman without petticoats,[9] believed himself to be as good a feminist as Mary Wollstonecraft, and wrote *The quintessence of Ibsenism* in an attempt to prove it; George Meredith, who takes apart in *The egoist* that syndrome later to be called male chauvinism; Henry James, whose novel *The Bostonians* strikes even a 'resisting' reader like Judith Fetterley as an almost faultless analysis of the power struggles between men and women as social classes;[10] Thomas Hardy, who challenged the sexual ideology of his time in creating characters like Tess Durbeyfield and Sue Bridehead, whose failure to conform to acceptable patterns of behaviour caused social upheavals which are replicated in formal disruptions in the novels.

All this work proves that long before the distinction was clearly drawn between a biologically given sex and a socially constructed gender, it was possible for certain male writers to reconstruct themselves temporarily as women for the purposes of creating female characters so untrammelled by contemporary conventional representations of womanhood that women readers even nowadays are amazed that men should have had such insights into what it means to live as a woman in a male-dominated society. Nevertheless, the knowledge that some of the best feminist writing in print has been done by men arouses resentment among those whose mission is to put women on top. Susan Hardy Aiken finds it necessary, for instance, to defend John Stuart Mill against those who would see him as being 'implicated in the very conventions he attacks' in *The subjection of women*, and who would interpret his defence of women as a chivalric gesture 'masking an essential contempt' for women who are thus presumed incapable of defending themselves.[11] Poor Mill; like all men, he is placed in a no-win situation by this type of discourse, for if he had ignored the servitude of Victorian women he would have been callous, and seeing that he doesn't he is patronising. Had he not written so well and so influentially this problem would never have arisen. As it is, the calibre of Mill's book is an embarrassment to the Women Only school of feminist criticism, and their adverse response to it constitutes a cynical warning to any man who tries his hand at feminist criticism: if you have to do it, make sure you don't do it better than women.

So the pertinent question is not whether men are capable of writing about feminism, for clearly they are, but whether or not they should be encouraged. (They can hardly be prevented from doing so, I might add, except by gatekeepers of the feminist publishing network, who might be tempted to indulge in retaliatory exclusionism on behalf of all those women whose writings never got into print because men stood in the way.) The separatist answer to this question is that men should be discouraged from writing feminist literary criticism for the same reason that they should be discouraged from teaching in women's studies courses, namely (as Robin Rowland puts it) that 'having the oppressor lecture on his oppression to the oppressed' is morally suspect.[12] This is to assume, however, that the identification of men with oppression is not an idea to be examined (are women never oppressed by women?) but an unquestionable article of faith.

A more moderate position would seek to erode separatism in the interests of integration on the far side of enlightenment, and encourage