



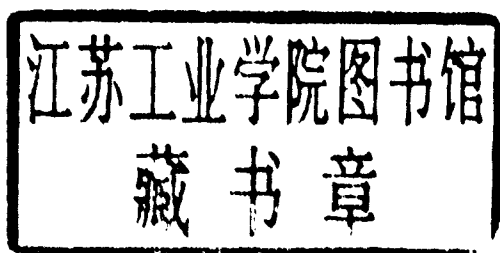
A History of Feminist Literary Criticism

Edited by
Gill Plain and Susan Sellers

CAMBRIDGE

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AND
SUSAN SELLERS



 **CAMBRIDGE**
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521852555

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First published 2007

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-85255-5 hardback

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Acknowledgements

Our thanks are due to the School of English at the University of St Andrews for the research funding, leave and support that have helped us to complete this project. Hope Jennings provided invaluable help with the compilation of the book – we could not have done this without her – and a number of people in St Andrews were generous in the provision of practical support. In particular we should like to thank the secretaries in the School of English: Jill Gamble, Jane Sommerville, Sandra McDevitt and Frances Mullan.

Susan Sellers would like to thank the Leverhulme Trust for the funding of a period of leave during which this project was first conceived, and we should both like to thank Ray Ryan and Maartje Scheltens at Cambridge University Press. Ray commissioned the book and supported it throughout its development, while Maartje carefully guided the book and us through the production process.

An enormous number of people helped in the preparation of the project, offering vital suggestions as we progressed. Inadequate records were kept of our many debts, but amongst those giving welcome advice were Sara Ahmed, Isobel Armstrong, Kate Chedzoy, Priyamvada Gopal, Mary Jacobus, Jackie Jones, Judith Halberstam, Berthold Schoene, Elaine Showalter and Frances Spalding. Above all we would like to thank our contributors for their unstinting professionalism and enthusiasm for the project. We feel privileged to have had such an excellent group of critics devoting their time to the book.

Finally, we would like to dedicate this book to Jo Campling and to the many other feminist critics who have helped and inspired us over the years.

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Introduction

Gill Plain and Susan Sellers

The impact of feminism on literary criticism over the past thirty-five years has been profound and wide-ranging. It has transformed the academic study of literary texts, fundamentally altering the canon of what is taught and setting a new agenda for analysis, as well as radically influencing the parallel processes of publishing, reviewing and literary reception. A host of related disciplines have been affected by feminist literary enquiry, including linguistics, philosophy, history, religious studies, sociology, anthropology, film and media studies, cultural studies, musicology, geography, economics and law.

Why is it, then, that the term feminist continues to provoke such ambivalent responses? It is as if the very success of the feminist project has resulted in a curious case of amnesia, as women within and without the academy forget the debt they owe to a critical and political project that undid the hegemony of universal man. The result of this amnesia is a tension in contemporary criticism between the power of feminism and its increasing spectrality. Journalists and commentators write of 'post-feminism', as if to suggest that the need to challenge patriarchal power or to analyse the complexities of gendered subjectivities had suddenly gone away, and as if texts were no longer the products of material realities in which bodies are shaped and categorised not only by gender, but by class, race, religion and sexuality. This is not a 'post-feminist' history that marks the passing of an era, but rather a 'still-feminist' one that aims to explore exactly what feminist criticism has done and is doing from the medieval era to the present. It is a history that both records and appraises, examining the impact of ideas in their original contexts and their ongoing significance for a new generation of students and researchers. Above all, *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* regards the feminist critical project as a vital

dimension of literary studies, and it aims to provide an accessible introduction to this vast and vibrant field.

DEFINING FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

Feminist literary criticism properly begins in the aftermath of 'second-wave' feminism, the term usually given to the emergence of women's movements in the United States and Europe during the Civil Rights campaigns of the 1960s. Clearly, though, a feminist literary criticism did not emerge fully formed from this moment. Rather, its eventual self-conscious expression was the culmination of centuries of women's writing, of women writing about women writing, and of women – and men – writing about women's minds, bodies, art and ideas. Woman, as Virginia Woolf observes in *A Room of One's Own*, her formative text of feminist literary criticism, is 'the most discussed animal in the universe' (1929/1977: 27).¹ Whether misogynist or emancipatory, the speculation excited by the concept of woman, let alone by actual women and their desires, created a rich history upon which second-wave feminism could be built. From the beginning feminist literary criticism was keen to uncover its own origins, seeking to establish traditions of women's writing and early 'feminist' thought to counter the unquestioning acceptance of 'man' and male genius as the norm. *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* thus begins by illustrating the remarkable 'protofeminist' writing that would eventually form the basis of modern feminist thought.

As the title of the book indicates, in this history of feminism our principal emphasis is on *literary* criticism and textuality. However, as the reader progresses through the volume, it will become clear that the boundaries between literature and politics, activism and the academy, are fluid and, consequently, can be difficult to determine. Although these blurred boundaries are frequently productive, we would argue that feminist literary criticism can be distinguished from feminist political activism and social theory. Most obviously, the difference lies in the dimension of textuality. From Carolyn Dinshaw's account of medieval symbolism, to Mary Eagleton's consideration of patriarchal critique, to Heather Love's analysis of queer bodies, debates around representation underpin all the chapters in this book. Across the centuries woman has been the subject of innumerable reconfigurations, and with every reinscription comes the necessity of re-reading. In the space of the text woman can be both defamed and defended, and it is here that the most persuasive possibilities can be found for imagining the future of the female subject.

USING A HISTORY OF FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

The book is divided into three parts, each of which is prefaced by an introduction explaining the rationale behind the territory covered. The chapters themselves have been produced by experts in the diverse fields of feminist literary criticism, and have been written in an accessible manner to provide orientation in the subject area for the beginner. However, because each chapter has been freshly commissioned for this project, and the contributors asked to return to the original sources, the resulting essays do more than provide an overview – they also offer new insights into the material, its history, reception and ongoing relevance, and these new readings will be of interest to scholars working in all areas of literary practice. Feminist literary criticism is a field characterised by the extensive cross-fertilisation of ideas. A number of key thinkers and their essays will appear in different contexts, and it is important to acknowledge these productive overlaps. Texts such as Adrienne Rich's 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', Hélène Cixous' 'The Laugh of the Medusa' and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* did not simply influence one school of feminist thought, but rather resonated across the entire spectrum of critical activity. The index will guide readers to the multiple locations in which discussions of key thinkers, essays, articles and books can be found. We recommend reading 'across' the book as well as through it in order to experience the divergent, dissonant and challenging encounters that characterise the feminist enterprise.

Despite the battles and the bad press, feminist literary criticism is a source of pleasure, stimulation, confirmation, insight, self-affirmation, doubt, questioning and reappraisal: it has the potential to alter the way we see ourselves, others and the world. *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* is indebted to the many wonderful studies of women, gender and writing that have enriched our understanding of the potentialities of feminist enquiry. In looking afresh at this material we are both taking stock and embracing the emergence of new critical possibilities. Feminist literary criticism is a subject with a future and it deserves the considered reflection of a substantial history. We hope this volume will contribute to that process.

NOTE

1. Virginia Woolf (1929/1977), *A Room of One's Own*, London: Grafton.

PART I

Pioneers and protofeminism

Introduction to Part I

Gill Plain

The history of feminist literary criticism properly begins some forty or fifty years ago with the emergence of what is commonly termed second-wave feminism. The history of this critical movement and its impact on culture and society will be charted in the second and third parts of this volume, but it is important to recognise that this story has a prequel. To write of pioneers and protofeminism is to explore the diverse texts, voices and lives that articulated feminist ideas and feminist critical positions before such categories existed. Medieval women were not 'feminists' and they had few opportunities to be critics, but as Carolyn Dinshaw observes in the opening essay, 'texts affect lived lives, and . . . if women had relatively little opportunity to author texts, they nonetheless felt their effects' (Dinshaw, 15). The history of women's engagement with texts and textuality far exceeds the parameters of second-wave feminism, and this history is integral to contemporary understandings of feminist practice.

Yet the history of the representation of women, their writing, their reading and their literary critical acts would in total need not a single volume but a library of texts, and in consequence Part I of this book sets out a combination of overview and example that indicates the complexity of feminism's origins without attempting an exhaustive survey. The overview begins with the first two chapters, Carolyn Dinshaw's 'Medieval Feminist Criticism' and Helen Wilcox's 'Feminist Criticism in the Renaissance and Seventeenth Century', which together establish the conditions of pre-Enlightenment female subjectivity. These chapters illustrate that 'woman' was a site of intense literary and critical activity that examined the power of the feminine as symbol even as it worked to contain and constrain women in practice. For Dinshaw, the tension between literary embodiments and lived reality is at the heart of the often fraught debates that surrounded narrative practice. These debates in many cases prefigured the concerns of contemporary feminist enquiry, but ultimately Dinshaw concludes that 'medieval critical gestures' cannot straightforwardly be regarded

as 'protofeminism'. Nonetheless, there are important historical continuities that need to be acknowledged, and a recognition of the relationship between gender and textuality is integral to understanding the literature and culture of the medieval period, from Chaucer's iconic *Wife of Bath* to Margery Kempe's autobiographical acts of self-construction.

By the early modern period, however, it is possible to trace a significant shift in women's relationship to textual culture. Helen Wilcox observes that it is now possible to describe women as 'feminists', and to define a range of 'phenomena' that might be termed feminist literary criticism. Indeed, she argues that a woman writer could 'play the part of a protofeminist simply by virtue of her decision to write' (Wilcox, 31). This was a period in which 'continuing constraints as well as new freedoms' provoked 'an outburst of writing by women' (37), and although in general women's literacy levels remained low, they nonetheless acquired far greater visibility as both producers and consumers of texts. From pamphlets to poetry and from devotional literature to advice books, women became active participants in literary culture. Their position, however, was not uncontested, and Wilcox traces the dominant debates that circulated around women's character, her writing, her place in society and her relationship to the legacy of Eve. Drawing on a remarkable range of often anonymous publications, Wilcox finds a dynamic political engagement taking shape in women's licensed and unlicensed engagement with the practices of reading and writing.

Dinshaw and Wilcox together provide a crucial mapping of the often evasive and unexpected territory of women's textual encounters, and their work gives a clear indication of the historical embeddedness of literary critical practice. The remaining chapters of Part I, however, adopt a contrasting but supplementary approach. Across the historical expanse of the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many women could have stood as pioneers of 'protofeminism': writers and activists whose thinking, writing and 'living' challenged the tenets of patriarchal social organisation and questioned the prescriptive norms of gender. In Britain writers such as Mary Shelley, Maria Edgeworth, Charlotte Brontë, Mrs Gaskell and George Eliot produced unconventional texts – and in some cases lived unconventional lives – which have long since been recognised as prefiguring the concerns of later feminist enquiry. Similarly political 'feminist' activists from Frances Power Cobbe to Millicent Garrett Fawcett produced groundbreaking journalism, polemics and cultural criticism. Much of this work has slipped from view, but it stands as a pertinent reminder of the symbiotic relationship between feminist politics and textual practice.¹ Even the seemingly conventional Jane Austen can be seen as a