



# FEMINIST LITERARY THEORY

A READER

Edited by Mary Eagleton

**Feminist  
Literary Theory**  
*A Reader*

Edited by  
Mary Eagleton

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藏书章

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## Preface

In 1982 I became involved in writing two feminist literature courses for the English section of the college of higher education where I teach. Both courses were designed to introduce students not only to women writers but to the theoretical debates within feminist criticism. The idea for this reader sprang directly from the difficulties I faced in putting together those courses. As I sifted through book after book and article after article I became aware not only of the quantity of feminist literary criticism that has been published over the last 15 to 20 years but also of the absence of any introduction to feminist literary theory. The pedagogic problem confronting me was how to fill that gap, how to offer students some understanding of the theoretical context without involving them in endless hours searching through the back numbers of journals. Since then two surveys of the field have been produced — K. K. Ruthven's *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction* (1984) and Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985). Collections of theoretical essays have also begun to appear — for example, *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (1985), edited by Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, and *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory* (1986), edited by Elaine Showalter. This book constitutes the first reader and its aim is to provide in a handy and accessible form key material in the development of a feminist literary theory. The introductions to the chapters set that material within current theoretical debates and suggest, without being too prescriptive, guidelines and interpretations.

I have in mind as my potential readers the women I teach now in higher education and those I have taught in the past in adult education and WEA classes. Students on MA courses in Women's Studies and women outside education who are interested in writing and recent theoretical developments will also find this book useful. My target audience may appear specific but I am aware that, in fact, it is very heterogeneous. It is not simply that women interested in feminist literature reveal the conflicting positions within feminism itself. What is equally evident in the courses that I teach is the profound gap between those women with a high level of feminist consciousness and a keen awareness of critical issues and those women for whom the whole situation is new, strange and intimidating. Thus the political spectrum I encounter in my teaching is wide. Within the same

group demands for revolution are voiced alongside demands for increased parliamentary representation for women; the case for separatism is followed by a plea for the gentle conversion of men; women who aim to work in rape crisis talk over coffee to those who are applying for jobs in management.

Large sections of this wider audience have not taken part in theoretical debates. They see theory as either too difficult, or less immediate and enjoyable than reading fiction, or they reject theory altogether as a suspiciously 'male' way of relating to the world. Conversely, most theoreticians, when writing their books and articles, have clearly not had adult education students in mind. My intention in this reader is to intervene, to help in introducing a wider audience to theory and in alerting the theoreticians to the existence of that wider audience. I am motivated in this project by my belief that an engagement with theory is unavoidable; there is no non-theoretical space for women to inhabit. However abstract and intractable theory may seem at times, it is an essential aspect of our liberation.

I am indebted to Julia Mosse for her careful and constructive editorial work, to my students whose responses to some of this material helped to shape my own, to Liz Swainston for her secretarial skills, and to David Pierce for finding so well the balance between shrewd criticism and enthusiastic praise.

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# Finding a Female Tradition

## INTRODUCTION

### *Breaking the Silence*

It is the women's movement, part of the other movements of our time for a fully human life, that has brought this forum into being; kindling a renewed, in most instances a first-time, interest in the writings and writers of our sex.

Linked with the old, resurrected classics on women, this movement in three years has accumulated a vast new mass of testimony, of new comprehensions as to what it is to be female. Inequities, restrictions, penalties, denials, leechings have been painstakingly and painfully documented; damaging differences in circumstances and treatment from that of males attested to; and limitations, harms, a sense of wrong, voiced.<sup>1</sup>

Tillie Olsen's essay, from which this quotation comes, was first published in 1972 and, later, became part of a volume entitled *Silences*. Both the date and the title are significant. English and American feminist critics in the 1970s were preoccupied with the idea that women writers had been silenced, by and large excluded from literary history. Olsen's quotation exemplifies the key interests of many feminist critics at that time — the desire to rediscover the lost work of women writers, while providing a context that would be ~~supportive of contemporary~~ women writers, and the wish to manifest 'what it is to be female', to declare the experience and perceptions that have been unheard. Aware that critical attention concentrated mostly on male writers, these critics demanded a status and recognition for women authors. But the aim was not simply to fit women into the male-dominated tradition; they also wanted to write the history of a tradition *among* women themselves. The extracts from Ellen Moers and Elaine Showalter, building on the earlier work of Virginia Woolf, reveal the affinity which women writers have felt for each other, the interest — sometimes encouraging, sometimes anxiously competitive — that they have taken in each other's work, the way the writing of one might prepare the ground for another, the problems all faced, and still face, in handling the institutions of literary production. The expansion of feminist literary criticism and, particularly in America, of courses about women's writing, and the establishment of feminist publishing houses or feminist lists within existing houses introduced

to readers an extensive new area of work: a teacher could no longer use the 'lack of material' argument to explain the absence of women writers from a course.

Showalter offers two cautionary notes. Firstly, she questions Moers's use of the term 'movement', which rather suggests a steady and continuous development in women's writing, and mentions the 'holes and hiatuses', the absences, gaps and disruptions which have broken that history. Though no writer ever enjoys continuous critical acclaim, Showalter agrees with Germaine Greer that women writers tend to disappear more easily from literary history, leaving their sisters bereft and struggling to reconstruct the lost tradition. Secondly, Showalter considers that the notion of a 'female imagination' can confirm the belief in 'a deep, basic, and inevitable difference between male and female ways of perceiving the world'. Such 'essentialist' or 'biologistic' beliefs imply that there is something intrinsic in the experience of being female and thus render gender biological rather than cultural; they tend to privilege gender at the expense of class or race; and they can too easily become ahistorical and apolitical, presuming an unproblematic unity among women across culture, class and history.

At the same time, it is necessary to stress that the search for women writers has constituted an important political challenge. To ask the questions — Where are the women writers? What has aided or inhibited their writing? How has criticism responded to their work? — introduces into literary criticism the determinant of gender and exposes literary tradition as a construct. The popular idea that 'talent will out', that 'great' writers will spontaneously and inevitably reveal their quality is shown to be false. To the questioning from Marxist criticism about the class bias of the literary tradition are added feminist queries about its androcentricity. What are proposed by mainstream criticism as impartial and objective academic judgements now look, to feminists, value-laden and ideologically suspect.

### *Who Belongs to the Female Tradition?*

Feminists researching the female tradition constantly emphasize both the amount and the variety of material to be uncovered — as Olsen says, 'a vast new mass of testimony'. Ironically, however, the contents of books purporting to deal with this extensive tradition often display a very narrow and homogeneous literary production, chiefly that of white, middle-class, heterosexual (or presented as heterosexual) women, living in England and America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This description would apply to many of the critical works produced in America in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, books which are considered founding texts in feminist literary criticism: Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* (1968), Patricia Meyer Spacks's *The Female Imagination* (1975), Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* (1976), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977). Lesbians, both black and white, and heterosexual women of colour criticize white heterosexual feminists for creating a literary history which is almost as

selective and ideologically bound as the male tradition. Sexism is challenged in the white, heterosexual work but heterosexism or homophobia or racism or ethnocentricity may not be. All the faults of male critics with respect to women's writing generally are reproduced by some feminist critics with respect to lesbian or black writing. There is the failure to recognize difference, the presumption that what is said about white, heterosexual women's writing will count for all women. Thus critical texts often establish an unconscious and unarticulated complicity between author and reader that the world is white and heterosexual. Black critics, for example, complain that the female stereotypes which so preoccupy white feminists — the Southern belle, or the Angel in the House, or the submissive wife — simply do not apply to them, though they are offered in the criticism as the dominant stereotypes and as widely relevant.<sup>2</sup> Where writing from a different position does exist its place is usually marginal — the odd paragraph, the single essay.)

Bonnie Zimmerman, Adrienne Rich and Alice Walker have had to seek out their own traditions, looking for names, for a history, for foremothers. In so doing they dispute the dominant literary values and expose the heterosexism and racism both within and without the women's movement. Rich's emphasis on the *political* importance of lesbianism and on heterosexuality as an institution challengingly moves the debate beyond the level of liberal pluralism. Lesbianism exists not as 'sexual preference' or an 'alternative life style' or as the choice of a minority group but as a fundamental critique of the dominant order and as an organizing principle for women. It is notable, though, that the determinant of class in women's writing continues to be largely ignored. The same critics who are taken to task for their lack of awareness about heterosexism or racism can be accused very often also of a class blindness; dozens of nineteenth-century women novelists are discussed with little more than a passing reference to their class positions. Equally, critics studying the work of lesbians or women of colour frequently write as if class does not exist, as if sexual orientation and colour are the only factors to be considered. Among American critics, Tillie Olsen emerges as an early honourable exception, her lifetime involvement in working-class politics generating a strong class consciousness. In England, the Marxist-feminist Literature Collective has attempted to marry class and gender in an understanding of women's writing, an approach which several members of the collective have developed further in their subsequent individual work.<sup>3</sup>

### *New Wine in Old Bottles?*

Michèle Barrett alerts us to another danger in creating a female tradition, namely that feminists may continue to employ aesthetic concepts that are compromised and intrinsically linked with the very social order they wish to undermine. To talk of the female tradition of writing can reinforce the canonical view, which looks upon literary history as a continuum of significant names. Rather than disrupting the individualistic values by



which the mainstream canon has been created, feminist critics sometimes merely replace a male First Eleven with a female one: so you study Aphra Behn instead of Dryden, Edith Wharton instead of Henry James, Dorothy Wordsworth instead of William. The very approach which has always seemed to find the majority of women writers lacking is transposed, uncritically, to a separate female tradition, and the humanist ethic which supports that approach is often accepted as basically valid, merely in need of extending its franchise.

The hierarchical nature of the mainstream canon and the tendency in conventional criticism to rank writers as 'great', 'good', or 'mediocre' has also proved awkward for feminist literary criticism. Eager to establish women writers and sensitive to dismissive criticism, feminists have often overcompensated; 'good' or 'mediocre' does not exist; all women writers are 'great'. For feminist publishing companies every reprinted book is a forgotten 'classic', guaranteed to rival *War and Peace*. Yet, although reluctant to rank our own writers, feminists have become embroiled, according to Michèle Barrett, in a fruitless competition with the male tradition. Such criticism argues either that women have not reached the standard of men because they have not been allowed to, or, alternatively, that they have reached the standard of male writers but their work has not been valued. In either case it is the male-dominated tradition which is taken as the reference point for women's writing.

Though we may dismiss the crude ranking of authors — a feminist Top Ten — and the futility of competing with the male tradition, this does not solve the problem of aesthetic value. Why do we find certain works more pleasurable, relevant, important than others? Barrett would say that the first need is to define the 'we'. Aesthetic value is not universal, or eternal; it does not reside within the text. Rather, it is culturally and historically specific, produced in the act of reading. In one sense feminists instinctively realize this. We recognize that the books we hold dear are not always prized by the literary establishment; hence these books cannot have an intrinsic quality to be perceived by *every* reader. On the other hand, the wish to establish a female tradition alongside and 'as good as' the male tradition can lead to idealist claims that underplay the materialist analysis of literature and ignore difference. Theoretically, a materialist politics should offer a real possibility for women who are non-white or lesbian or working class or any combination of the three. If the critic believes that race, sexual orientation and class are important constituents of writing, then a criticism which recognizes difference and represents more than a small privileged group of women becomes possible.

### *The French Perspective*

The last three extracts in this chapter speak from a very different position. They all derive from recent developments in French feminist theory that have attempted to relate ideas from philosophy, linguistics and psychoanalysis. One of the presumptions of the Anglo-American criticism is that

there definitely is a female tradition, buried like hidden treasure in literary history — Showalter refers to it as like the lost continent of Atlantis, rising from the sea — and that the task of the feminist critic is to dig it out, brush it down and exhibit it. The French perspective, as the Viviane Forrester passage indicates, contends that we cannot know what women are. The feminine is that which has been repressed and women's vision — in Forrester's case with regard to film — is only evident in 'what you don't see', what is absent. While Anglo-American critics are looking for women in history, French women writers, Elaine Marks tells us, are:

looking for women in the unconscious, which is to say in their own language. "Cherchez la femme" might be one of their implied mottos; where repression is, she is.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, although we may uncover a whole list of forgotten novels by women or films with female directors, feminists of this school are unwilling to see that as necessarily a female tradition. They want to put the series of questions that Shoshana Felman asks. Are these novelists and directors speaking as women or are they 'speaking the language of men'? Can they be said to be speaking as women simply because they are born female? To bring the point painfully close to home, is Margaret Thatcher speaking as a woman or is she merely the ventriloquist's dummy for the male voice?

Felman's questions raise a further issue echoed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work. The problem is not only who is speaking and how is she speaking but to whom is she speaking and on behalf of whom is she speaking. Spivak stresses a double focus:

not merely who am I? but who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me?

Such questioning offers interesting insights into the problems of constructing a female tradition. The possibility for some feminists to speak, without awareness, from a highly privileged position must result, in part, from not asking the question, 'Who am I?'; the neglect of the non-white, or working-class, or lesbian perspective must relate to the failure to ask, 'To whom am I speaking?'; and the tendency to universalize, to make claims on behalf of all women, must mean that Felman's anxiety about women as 'the silent and subordinate object' that is 'spoken for', has not been fully heeded. Spivak extends the context of this argument further beyond our own countries to the women of the Third World. How are the academic First World feminist and the illiterate Indian woman to speak together with understanding, without patronage, without exploitation, with a full recognition of both community and diversity? Spivak does not reject out of hand the historical approach or the textual analysis of the Anglo-American critics; indeed, it is partly for her lack of attention to these aspects that she criticizes Julia Kristeva. But it is to French feminist theory and to a politics of desire and women's sexual pleasure that Spivak chiefly looks for her answers — and that is an approach I shall consider more fully in the final chapter.