
Carol Iannone

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_l_34

Recommended Citation

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Education: National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities, Subject Files I (1973-1996) at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Iannone, Carol: National Council on the Humanities Nomination (1991) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu.
Feminism and literature

Elaine Showalter, editor The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory. Pantheon, 403 pages, $22.95

reviewed by Carol Iannone

As feminist ideology would have it, the world presents a harsh and alien landscape to woman. Shaped against her grain by a tradition that has left her true identity out of account, she must articulate her very grievances in a language created by her oppressor. Inevitably, in the feminist view, literature itself mirrors this oppression. Thus, the feminist literary critic sees the traditional liter-
ary canon as a “culture-bound political construct” and literary posterity as nothing more than a “group of men with the access to publishing and reviewing that enabled them to enforce their views of literature and to define a group of ageless ‘classics.’” Given the profound illegitimacy at the heart of literary tradition, the feminist critic insists upon “a complete revolution of our literary heritage”—“a revision of the accepted theoretical assumptions about reading and writing that have been based entirely on male literary experience.” In this way gender is established “as a fundamental category of literary analysis.”

Such is the view of literary culture presented in The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory, a collection edited by Elaine Showalter, professor of English at Princeton University. The collection consists of “eighteen of the most important and controversial essays written by pioneers in the field [of feminist literary criticism] over the last decade.” Contributors include such prominent feminist critics as Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Carolyn Heilbrun, Annette Kolodny, Nancy K. Miller, Lillian S. Robinson, and Showalter herself, who is responsible for the views quoted above. These essays detail the possibilities for a “female aesthetic,” a “gynocritics” as Showalter terms it, comprising “women’s culture” and specifically female literary forms and critical models. They also address the function of feminist criticism in the academy.

While there is no firm agreement on the exact nature of the “female aesthetic,” it is indeed the governing principle of the book. In “A Map for Rereading: Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts,” Annette Kolodny argues that the artistic obscurity of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Susan Glaspell’s “A Jury of Her Peers”—two short stories by early twentieth-century American writers—was due to society’s failure to appreciate them as encodings of “women’s imaginative universe.” In “Sentimental Power,” Jane P. Tompkins denounces the traditional aesthetic dismissal of sentimentality as a male formulation and attempts to advance Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin to a higher artistic plane. In “Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women’s Fiction,” Nancy K. Miller isolates the moments of defiance against the “dominant” culture in George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss and comes to read “everywhere [in this novel] a protest against the division of labor that grants men the world and women love.” For Lillian S. Robinson—in “Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon”—it would appear to be the “female aesthetic” alone that makes “women’s letters, diaries, journals, autobiographies, oral histories, and private poetry” significant subjects for scholarly attention. The most obvious embodiment of a “female form” in the book is Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s essay, “For the Etruscans,” an attempt at “nonlinear,” non-discursive criticism that weaves personal experience with wide-ranging meditations on literature.

As this sampling of articles may suggest, the collection offers a fairly good demonstration of the liabilities of the feminist approach to literature. No amount of theorizing, for example, can disguise the fact that “nonlinear”—when applied to intellectual scholarship—is a euphemism for confused, evasive, and inconclusive. But the problems are not just formal ones. How does anti-sentimentality come to be a male construct any more than a female one? And since when is The Mill on the Floss a novel about the contemporary feminist view of the female dilemma? Clearly, feminist politics are the touchstone of this criticism, and every explanation must follow therefrom, no matter what damage it does to our understanding of the complexity of art. Inevitably, the feminists discredit their own efforts through political urgency. It is not politics, after all, that will obtain higher artistic status for writers like Glaspell and Gilman, assuming they are proper candidates for literary revaluation. But of course, without the constraints of traditional literary aesthetics, the possibilities for revision are endless. Annette Kolodny even dismisses the “recurrent de-
attempts to advance Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin to a new place in literature. In “Emphasis Added: New Possibilities in Women’s Fiction,” Annette Kolodny isolates the moments where “the dominant” culture offers space for women’s writings. The Mill on the Floss is one of the novels that has found a home in the academy. Mary Elizabeth Talbot claims that “the increased power of feminist perspectives within the university has led to innumerable changes in literary textbooks, in curriculum structure, and in the publication of articles and books.” Some three hundred colleges and universities now offer degree options in women’s studies. In addition, many new journals of feminist criticism have sprung up, some, like Signs and Feminist Studies, with respectable academic backing. General academic periodicals, like the Journal of American History, have also granted generous space to feminist criticism.

Moreover, Showalter claims, feminism is forging alliances with other modern critical schools. “Feminist, black, and poststructuralist critics, both male and female” now comprise an “avant-garde that shares the same enemies, namely those who urge a return to the ‘basics’ and the ‘classics,’” those who fail to recognize in these new schools of criticism a virtual “renaissance” in the humanities. As Sandra Gilbert describes it, feminism is only one of a series of “profound changes that have recently shaken Western culture in general and English departments in particular,” among them, “open enrollment, the sixties, . . . extra sections of remedial English, . . . and a whole new literary canon, including not just the works of Borges in translation and the novels of Virginia Woolf but also science fiction, films, women’s literature, black literature, Chicano literature, Asian-American literature, native-American literature, and more, much more.”

While forging their new approach, feminist critics met their most obvious resistance in the form of male colleagues supposedly terrified by alterations in a canon that had, in Annette Kolodny’s words, “previously reified [their] sense of power and significance in the world.” Nevertheless, according to Showalter, the resistance of male critics is easing now as they begin to concede that “literary misogyny can no longer be overlooked or excused.” Thus, some of the classics “now seem less heroic,” as one Lawrence Lipking observes to Elaine Showalter, “and some of them less funny.” In the words of a male medievalist quoted by Gilbert, “Everything has to be done again.”

Despite Showalter’s celebration of the triumph of feminism in the academy, however, a number of critics in the collection insist that feminism is being granted only token acceptance, and they have a point. Indeed, what kind of serious dialogue can emerge with a critical school that considers literature by women the “cultural manifestation of an oppressed people”? Gilbert herself suggests that even “apparently supportive colleagues only support feminist criticism because it is ‘in,’ it is popular, it is trendy.”

The truth is that the academy has not so much accepted feminist criticism as it has simply capitulated to it. Like feminism generally, literary feminism encourages a kind of intellectual blackmail, according to which objections to feminist theory and practice can only derive from sexism, male paragigmas, masculine aesthetics, “literary misogyny,” etc. Moreover, by demanding a wholesale revisionism, feminist critics have flaunted what amounts to an incapacity to work creatively with the varying weights and nuances of tradition. They have placed themselves outside the values and standards that have traditionally governed intellectual discourse and academic debate; thus their “acceptance” is of necessity only a nominal one.

These tactics may well betray feminism’s lurking suspicion of its own illegitimacy, since no valid intellectual position can be entirely beyond all procedures of verifiability. Perhaps feminists have dismissed tradition—in favor of a reductive and bullying ideology—because they sense that they can’t demand the status they want, for themselves and women generally, on the usual grounds. “Male-dominated” though the Western tra-

The New Criterion November 1985
dition may be, it has always granted both sexes the possibility of transcending gender—in religion, for example, or in literature itself. Indeed, those detested classics became classics precisely because they transcended the ordinary life of their times and addressed themselves to (yes) universal truths. Furthermore, women have enjoyed various forms of power, although not always those forms favored by contemporary feminism. It is feminism that presents an extraordinarily wittered view of feminine history, by focusing only on female deprivation and ignoring female fulfillment. And it is feminism that has transformed gender—in literary studies as elsewhere—from a merely biological imperative to a totalitarian determinism that would resist all the qualifications of centuries of culture. Elaine Showalter’s counsel that feminist criticism has “more to learn from women’s studies than from English studies, more to learn from international feminist theory than from another seminar on the masters” can only result in impoverishing women scholars, exacerbating any real alienation from which they may suffer, ghettoizing them, setting them apart as a subspecies, as prisoners of sex.

Nevertheless, there are reasons for guarded optimism. Two recent debates in the pages of The New York Times Book Review would seem to indicate that many thoughtful women—women writers in particular—do not accept the interests of ideological feminism as identical with their own, or the methods of feminist literary criticism as the best means of understanding either literature in general or literature by women in particular.

The first debate began with an essay by the ubiquitous Elaine Showalter objecting to the resistance of many women writers—Joan Didion, Doris Lessing, Susan Sontag, Iris Murdoch, and Cynthia Ozick—to the idea of a female literary tradition. In a reply, Ozick noted the contradiction in feminists’ lamenting “the exclusion of women writers from the ‘cultural mainstream’ while simultaneously supporting their exclusion through insistence on ‘women’s writing as a distinct literary category.’” Another female respondent argued that writing and reading by gender narrows the focus of how we create and enjoy art.

The second debate involved Gail Godwin’s review of the Norton Anthology of Literature by Women, edited by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who, in addition to being contributors to the present collection, are the authors of the seminal work on the so-called female literary tradition, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination. Godwin—a novelist of considerable reputation—protested that their anthology elevated “the values of feminist interpretation . . . to a summa at the expense of literary art and individual talents,” and that women writers, especially younger ones, “whose prose or poems do not always deal with the female experience or lend themselves to feminist explication,” had been virtually ignored. Furthermore, Godwin observed, even renowned writers like Jane Austen and George Eliot were represented in the anthology by lesser work (in Austen’s case by a spoof she wrote as a teenager) because these fit better into the “feminist pattern” Gilbert and Gubar were “attempting to impose.”

Godwin was met by a wave of angry responses from the editors of the book and from other major feminist literary critics. One respondent, Joanne Feit Diehl, predictably characterized Godwin’s view as “the resistance of a woman writer who is herself at odds concerning her relationship to a tradition of other women”—such resistance being of course for feminists the only grounds from which disagreement with their ideas can spring. But in her reply Godwin reported receiving many supportive letters from women readers and writers.

Ironically, if feminism would define itself, as Godwin suggests, as a celebration of “women’s strengths and opportunities”—or, as Cynthia Ozick suggests, as the desire for “access to, and participation in, the professions, the arts and every other human enterprise that makes the world go”—then it would be at odds with the aspirations of
the new feminist criticism as represented in Elaine Showalter's collection. Such a view would have to presume women's capacities for thriving within their cultural tradition and would eventually have to acknowledge the representation women have had in that tradition even to this point. Perhaps this is why feminist critics are driving themselves to such egregious violations of common sense and scholarly standards as are shown in The New Feminist Criticism: not because women haven't had cultural status, but because they have, and it has failed to bring about the utopia of the feminists' dreams.

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to two recently published books by contributors to The New Criterion: James Lord's Giacometti: A Biography (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $30), and Hilton Kramer's The Revenge of the Philistines: Art & Culture 1972-1984 (The Free Press, $25). Parts of these books were published in earlier issues of The New Criterion.