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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.[1]

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. British and American feminist critics in the 1970s were preoccupied with the idea that women writers had been silenced by, and largely excluded from, literary history. The Olsen 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; that was dismissed as an 'add women and stir' model. Rather, they wanted to produce the history of a tradition *among* women themselves. The writing of this period,

building on the earlier work of Virginia Woolf, reveals 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 women writers faced, and still face, in handling the institutions of literary production.[2] The expansion of feminist literary criticism and 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 research. It became increasingly difficult for a teacher to use the 'lack of material' argument to explain the absence of women writers from a course.

Elaine Showalter offers two cautionary notes. Firstly, she questions Ellen Moers's use of the term 'movement', which 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 believes that women writers have disappeared more easily from literary history, leaving their sisters bereft and struggling to reconstruct the fractured tradition. Secondly, Showalter feels that Patricia Meyer Spacks's concept 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 viewpoints imply that there is something both intrinsic in the experience of being female and common to all women. The danger is that gender is privileged at the expense of other differences and that the approach can too easily become ahistorical and apolitical in the assumption of an unproblematic unity among women, across culture, class and history.[3]

At the same time, Showalter would be among the first 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 reveals literary tradition as a construct. The commonplace 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 have been proposed by conservative criticism as impartial and objective academic judgements begin to look value-laden and ideologically suspect.

Who Belongs to the Female Tradition?

The quotation from Olsen hints at two contradictions that have dogged feminist criticism for many years. On the one hand, how can feminism speak of the relentless silencing of women while at the same time maintaining that there is a formidable tradition to uncover? On the other hand, how can

feminism claim a rich plurality of female voices and then produce a rather narrow and homogeneous literary heritage – chiefly that of white, middle-class, heterosexual (or presented as heterosexual) women, living in England and the USA during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? This description would apply to many of the critical works produced in the USA in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, books which are, rightly, 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* (1977, although parts of the book go back to 1963), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977). Not surprisingly, then, by the end of the 1970s, a strong counter-voice from lesbians and 'women of color' began to question feminism's own processes of inclusion and exclusion. Sexism might be challenged in the white, heterosexual work, but heterosexism or homophobia or racism or ethnocentricity may not be. For example, Afra-American feminist critics pointed out 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.[4] Where writing from a different position does exist, its place is frequently marginal – the odd paragraph, the single essay.

We see in Adrienne Rich's work an eagerness to seek out new traditions, looking for names, for a history, for foremothers.[5] This activity inevitably disputes the dominant literary values, confronts feminism's own failings and, yet, illustrates how feminist literary criticism has always been in critical dialogue with itself. 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 a 'sexual preference' or an 'alternative lifestyle' but as a fundamental critique of the dominant order and as an organizing principle for women. It is worthwhile comparing Rich's views with the even more challenging thesis of Monique Wittig (Chapter 6). Yet the problem of conceptualizing a literary tradition remains as intractable for 'women of color' and lesbians as it does for white women and heterosexuals. Chris Weedon, reflecting on the work of Rich and, particularly, Bonnie Zimmerman, examines the key question of definition. The meaning of lesbianism, she maintains, is not fixed or dependent solely on the lifestyle of the author or the subject matter of the text; rather, the meaning 'changes with historical shifts in the discursive construction of female sexuality'. How, then, can one define what a lesbian tradition is?[6] Similarly, Ann duCille, looking back at the rise of black feminist literary studies in the 1970s from the perspective of 2006, sees another history of selection and exclusion and that 'missing in action' is, particularly, the work of nineteenth-century black women writers.

Omission might be caused by all manner of factors – antipathy or blind-spots, personal self-interest, poor scholarship, restrictions of the format – but it would be wrong to explain this phenomenon solely at the level of the individual and individual inadequacies. duCille suggests a more subtle ideological process, how the black feminist critics of the 1970s had difficulty in incorporating the nineteenth-century material into the vision they were creating of a black women's literary heritage; it did not 'fit' with the tenor, politics or aspirations of the moment.[7] Paul Lauter's and Clare Hemmings's extracts point to other factors, namely the social determinants operating within institutions and discourse. In Lauter's case study, the focus is the creation, in American higher education of the 1920s, of a middle-class, male, white, professoriate, which was in a position to determine the content of the American literary canon and, in Lauter's view, 'virtually eliminated black, white female and all working-class writers'.[8] Hemmings's extract is concerned with the production, through citation, of a particular narrative of poststructuralist feminist thought which certainly does disservice to 1970s feminism but, equally, simplifies the diversity of feminist positions in play at any moment and the range of interest held by the theorists themselves.[9] Both Lauter and Hemmings show the importance of a micro analysis and the significance of detail.

New Wine in Old Bottles?

A further problem in creating a female literary tradition is that feminists may unwittingly continue to employ aesthetic concepts that are compromised and intrinsically linked with the very social order they wish to undermine. Understanding this is complicated by the fact that debates sometimes range rather uncertainly across three aspects: searching for a literary tradition; critiques of canonical ranking while, at the same time, constructing one's own canon; and questions of aesthetic value. Thus, to talk of a 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 has been created, feminist critics may merely replace a male First Eleven with a female one: so you can study Aphra Behn instead of Dryden, Edith Wharton instead of Henry James, Dorothy Wordsworth instead of William.[10] 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 accepted as basically valid, only in need of extending its franchise.[11] Yet, even if we reject the canonical in favour of a more dispersed sense of literary history, the problem of aesthetic value remains. Why do we find certain works more pleasurable, relevant, important than others; how do gender and other determinants impact on those responses; and are we, then, inevitably making a claim for these works as

having a privileged place in a female literary tradition?[12] Rita Felski's response in a chapter notably entitled 'Why Feminism Doesn't Need an Aesthetic (and Why It Can't Ignore Aesthetics)' – the contradiction says it all – turns to David Carroll's concept of 'paraesthetics' and its uncertain, unsettling, resistant view of aesthetics.[13]

Equally, concern has focused on the generational thinking involved in creating a literary tradition.[14] Though Woolf advises us to 'think back through our mothers' and Alice Walker to go 'in search of our mothers' gardens', other commentators have been less sure about embracing a familial and, specifically, matrilineal history. For Linda Williams, the matrilineal heritage again reinforces the notion of a commonality among women and dangerously substitutes a female paradigm of mother and daughter for the male Oedipal model of father and son. However, Jane Spencer, while certainly not endorsing any sense of 'happy families', productively analyses the biological, social and metaphorical meanings of kinship. Her detailed literary history from 1660 to 1830 reveals a dense, shifting field where the woman author can feature as Muse and as the biological or metaphorical mother, daughter or sister to both male and female authors. Like Williams, Nancy K. Miller notes the haunting presence in feminist criticism of Oedipal relations, that 'biological and murderous simplicity' recycled through Harold Bloom. Using the analogy of letter writing and the example of Germaine de Staël's *Corinne or Italy* (1809), Miller hopes to 'return to sender' all the accepted assumptions and values of literary criticism and to produce a more nuanced sense of generational legacy.

The View from Elsewhere

Despite all the problems and qualifications, Anglo-American criticism rests on the presumption that there definitely is a female tradition, buried like hidden treasure in literary history, and that the task of the feminist critic is to dig it out, brush it down and exhibit it; Showalter uses a different simile and compares feminist literary tradition to the lost continent of Atlantis rising from the sea. As we have already seen from Weedon's and Miller's pieces, critics approaching the problem from a different theoretical position, chiefly influenced by French deconstructive and psychoanalytical thought, are not quite so sure that such an entity exists. Viviane Forrester 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'. It is not that women are hidden or silent; rather they are lacking. 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'.[15] 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 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? Who is speaking 'for women' and how?

A second 'view from elsewhere' comes from feminist interest in historiography. We have already seen in the extracts from duCille and Hemmings the importance of self-reflexive assessments of how feminism is constructing its own history – as Hemmings indicates, the *stories* we tell ourselves and others. This work has been greatly enabled by research into women's pre-nineteenth-century writing. Literary feminism has constructed a history, claims Margaret J. M. Ezell, which reads backwards, with the result that women's earlier writing has been, to use Jerome McGann's term, 'gerrymandered'. Moreover, this linear approach is based on a nineteenth-century model of narrative historiography which has built into it a presumption of progress. Like Ezell, Betty A. Schellenberg sees the problem in diachronic readings but also in the 'binary synchronic structure' of the dominant feminist model which produces oppositional relationships. She shows how effectively subsequent work has challenged the simple binary view but, interestingly, has, on occasions, confirmed the diachronic.[16] What this work points to is a more subtle study of the woman author, situated in history and discourse, and viewed through a range of interpretative categories, including gender.

Notes

1 Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (London: Virago, 1980), p. 23. Note that parts of this volume go back to 1965.

2 An example of the continuing problems would be the production of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, the first three volumes of which were published in 1991 with a notable absence of women writers. The furore that greeted the publication led in 2002 to the publication of two subsequent volumes on Irish women's writing: Angela Bourke (ed.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions* Vols. IV and V (Cork: Cork University Press). For discussion of this issue and the politics of canon making, see: John Greene et al., 'Wealth, Gender, Politics: Three Views of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*', *Eire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 111–31 (1992); Anne Fogarty, 'Challenging Boundaries', *Irish Literary Supplement*, 22 Mar. 2003; Elvira Johnston, '*The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* Vols. 4 and 5 and the Invention of the Medieval Woman', *Irish University Review*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2003), pp. 392–9; Helen Thompson, *The Current Debate about the Irish Literary Canon* (Lewiston, New York: Edward Mellen, 2006).

3 Spacks's work is again used as an example of possible biologism in Peggy Kamuf's extract in Ch. 5.

4 See Deborah E. McDowell, 'New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism', *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 14, no. 4 (Winter 1980); Andrea B. Rushing, 'Images of Black Women in Modern African Poetry: An Overview' in *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*, eds. Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker, Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1979); Alice Walker, 'A Letter of the Times, or Should this Sado-Masochism Be Saved?' in *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).

5 Further examples here would be the essays of Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983) and Bonnie Zimmerman, 'What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3 (Autumn 1981).

6 An extract from the Barbara Smith article to which Weedon refers can be found in Chapter 2. The issue of definition is considered again in Chapter 4.

7 The response can operate in a contrary way. As Rita Felski has remarked on Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*: 'By depicting Victorian writers as seething rebels rather than moral guardians, as maimed victims of patriarchy rather than prim and censorious foremothers, they created precursors very much after their own heart' (*Literature After Feminism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 66–7.

8 Lauter's essay was subsequently included in his *Canons and Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), a collection which extensively discusses the professional, academic and publishing production of a canon. For a more recent examination of literary feminism as an institutional and critical production, see Sharon Marcus, 'Feminist Criticism: A Tale of Two Bodies', *PMLA*, vol. 121, no. 5 (Oct. 2006), pp. 1722–8.

9 The discussion of the possibility/ impossibility of constructing an adequate feminist history continued in a later volume of *Feminist Theory*. See Rachel Torr, 'What's Wrong with Aspiring to Find Out What Has Really Happened in Academic Feminism's Recent Past? Response to Clare Hemmings' "Telling Feminist Stories" ', *Feminist Theory*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2007), pp. 59–67, and, in the same volume, Hemmings's reply, 'What Is a Feminist Theorist Responsible For? Response to Rachel Torr', pp. 69–76. See also Mary Eagleton, 'Who's Who and Where's Where: Constructing Feminist Literary Studies', *Feminist Review*, no. 53 (Summer 1996), pp. 1–23 on the historiography of feminist criticism; the chapter 'Perverse Presentism' in Judith Halbestam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1998); Katherine Binhammer and Jeanne Wood (eds.), *Women and Literary History: 'For There She Was'* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003); and Alison Donnell, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History* (London: Routledge, 2006).

10 Note how the focus on the individual woman author can serve a different purpose in tracing the long-term reception of women writers and the intricate patterning of readerships, affects, literary evaluations, reputations and influences. See, for example, Jane Spencer, *Aphra Behn's Afterlife* (Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 2000) and Robert McClure Smith and Ellen Weinauer (eds.), *American Culture, Canons, and the Case of Elizabeth Stoddard* (Tuscaloosa and London, University of Alabama Press, 2003).

11 A more recent strategy has been to think of literary history in a gendered but non-separatist way. See Karen K. Kilcup (ed.), *Soft Canons: American Women Writers and Masculine Tradition* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999) and Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher (eds.), *No More Separate Spheres! A Next Wave American Studies Reader* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2002).

12 In addition to Felski, other work on feminist aesthetic value would include: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value', in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987); Steven Connor, *Theory and Cultural Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); Janet Wolff, *The Aesthetics of Uncertainty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

13 Other strategies would include Griselda Pollock's suggestion that we should concentrate not on inclusion or on exclusion from the canon but on 'differencing' the canon: see *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999). See also John Guillory's suggestion in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) that we focus on cultural capital rather than representation when thinking about literary canons.

14 See also on generational thinking Devoney Looser and E. Ann Kaplan (eds.), *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) and Stacy Gillis and Rebecca Munford, 'Genealogies and Generations: The Politics and Praxis of Third Wave Feminism', *Women's History Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 165–82. Hemmings's essay is also strongly informed by a sense of genealogies and generations.

15 Elaine Marks, 'Women and Literature in France', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1978), p. 836.

16 In addition to the titles noted by Schellenberg, see also Anne E. Boyd, *Writing for Immortality: Women Writers and the Emergence of High Literary Culture in America* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004) and Catherine Gallagher, 'A History of the Precedent: Rhetorics of Legitimation in Women's Writing', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 26 (2000), pp. 309–27 for explorations of women's strategic positioning of themselves in literary culture, again questioning the accepted binary relationship.

Virginia Woolf

A Room of One's Own

And with Mrs Behn we turn a very important corner on the road. We leave behind, shut up in their parks among their folios, those solitary great ladies who wrote without audience or criticism, for their own delight alone. We come to town and rub shoulders with ordinary people in the streets. Mrs Behn was a middle-class woman with all the plebeian virtues of humour, vitality and courage; a woman forced by the death of her husband and some unfortunate adventures of her own to make her living by her wits. She had to work on equal terms with men. She made, by working very hard, enough to live on. The importance of that fact outweighs anything that she actually wrote, even the splendid 'A Thousand Martyrs I have made', or 'Love in Fantastic Triumph sat', for here begins the freedom of the mind, or rather the possibility that in the course of time the mind will be free to write what it likes. For now that Aphra Behn had done it, girls could go to their parents and say, You need not give me an allowance; I can make money by my pen. Of course the answer for many years to come was, Yes, by living the life of Aphra Behn! Death would be better! and the door was slammed faster than ever. That profoundly interesting subject, the value that men set upon women's chastity and its effect upon their education, here suggests itself for discussion, and might provide an interesting book if any student at Girton or Newnham cared to go into the matter. Lady Dudley, sitting in diamonds among the midges of a Scottish moor, might serve for frontispiece. Lord Dudley, *The Times* said when Lady Dudley died the other day, 'a man of cultivated taste and many accomplishments, was benevolent and bountiful, but whimsically despotic. He insisted upon his wife's wearing full dress, even at the remotest shooting-lodge in the Highlands; he loaded her with gorgeous jewels', and so on, 'he gave her everything – always excepting any measure of responsibility'. Then Lord Dudley had a stroke and she nursed him and ruled his estates with supreme competence for ever after. That whimsical despotism was in the nineteenth century too.

But to return. Aphra Behn proved that money could be made by writing at the sacrifice, perhaps, of certain agreeable qualities; and so by degrees writing became not merely a sign of folly and a distracted mind, but was of practical importance. A husband might die, or some disaster overtake the family. Hundreds of women began as the eighteenth century drew on to add to their pin money, or to come to the rescue of their families by making translations or writing the innumerable bad novels which have ceased to be recorded even in text-books, but are to be picked up in the fourpenny boxes in

the Charing Cross Road.[7] The extreme activity of mind which showed itself in the later eighteenth century among women – the talking, and the meeting, the writing of essays on Shakespeare, the translating of the classics – was founded on the solid fact that women could make money by writing. Money dignifies what is frivolous if unpaid for. It might still be well to sneer at 'blue stockings with an itch for scribbling', but it could not be denied that they could put money in their purses. Thus, towards the end of the eighteenth century a change came about which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses. The middle-class woman began to write. For if *Pride and Prejudice* matters, and *Middlemarch* and *Villette* and *Wuthering Heights* matter, then it matters far more than I can prove in an hour's discourse that women generally, and not merely the lonely aristocrat shut up in her country house among her folios and her flatterers, took to writing. Without those forerunners, Jane Austen and the Brontës and George Eliot could no more have written than Shakespeare could have written without Marlowe, or Marlowe without Chaucer, or Chaucer without those forgotten poets who paved the ways and tamed the natural savagery of the tongue. For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice. Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of Fanny Burney, and George Eliot done homage to the robust shade of Eliza Carter[8] – the valiant old woman who tied a bell to her bedstead in order that she might wake early and learn Greek. All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn which is, most scandalously but rather appropriately, in Westminster Abbey, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds. It is she – shady and amorous as she was – who makes it not quite fantastic for me to say to you tonight: Earn five hundred a year by your wits.

(1929)

Notes

7 *Charing Cross Road*: in London, a centre for second-hand bookshops.

8 *Eliza Carter*: Elizabeth Carter (1717–1806), translator of Epictetus, letter-writer, friend of Dr Johnson and an original 'blue stocking'. The 'blue stockings' were a group of women who hosted evening parties in the 1750s. Eschewing card games and evening dress in favour of literary conversation, they invited eminent men of letters to take part in their discussions. One member of the group, Benjamin Stillingfleet, regulary attended wearing blue worsted stockings instead of black evening clothes, giving rise to the nickname 'blue stocking' for a woman with literary tastes.

Elaine Showalter

A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing

As the works of dozens of women writers have been rescued from what E. P. Thompson calls 'the enormous condescension of posterity,'[16] and considered in relation to each other, the lost continent of the female tradition has risen like Atlantis from the sea of English literature. It is now becoming clear that, contrary to Mill's theory, women have had a literature of their own all along. The woman novelist, according to Vineta Colby, was 'really neither single nor anomalous,' but she was also more than a 'register and a spokesman for her age.'[17] She was part of a tradition that had its origins before her age, and has carried on through our own.

Many literary historians have begun to reinterpret and revise the study of women writers. Ellen Moers sees women's literature as an international movement, 'apart from, but hardly subordinate to the mainstream: an undercurrent, rapid and powerful. This "movement" began in the late eighteenth century, was multinational, and produced some of the greatest literary works of two centuries, as well as most of the lucrative pot-boilers.'[18] Patricia Meyer Spacks, in *The Female Imagination*, finds that 'for readily discernible historical reasons women have characteristically concerned themselves with matters more or less peripheral to male concerns, or at least slightly skewed from them. The differences between traditional female preoccupations and roles and male ones make a difference in female writing.'[19] Many other critics are beginning to agree that when we look at women writers collectively we can see an imaginative continuum, the recurrence of certain patterns, themes, problems, and images from generation to generation.

This book is an effort to describe the female literary tradition in the English novel from the generation of the Brontës to the present day, and to show how the development of this tradition is similar to the development of any literary subculture. Women have generally been regarded as 'sociological chameleons,' taking on the class, lifestyle, and culture of their male relatives. It can, however, be argued that women themselves have constituted a subculture within the framework of a larger society, and have been unified by values, conventions, experiences, and behaviors impinging on each individual. It is important to see the female literary tradition in these broad terms, in relation to the wider evolution of women's self-awareness and to the ways in which any minority group finds its direction of self-expression relative to a dominant society, because we cannot show a pattern of deliberate progress and accumulation. It is true, as Ellen Moers writes, that 'women studied with a special closeness the works written by their own sex';[20] in terms of influences, borrowings, and affinities, the tradition is strongly marked. But it is also full

of holes and hiatuses, because of what Germaine Greer calls the 'phenomenon of the transience of female literary fame'; 'almost uninterruptedly since the Interregnum, a small group of women have enjoyed dazzling literary prestige during their own lifetimes, only to vanish without trace from the records of posterity.'[21] Thus each generation of women writers has found itself, in a sense, without a history, forced to rediscover the past anew, forging again and again the consciousness of their sex. Given this perpetual disruption, and also the self-hatred that has alienated women writers from a sense of collective identity, it does not seem possible to speak of a 'movement.'

I am also uncomfortable with the notion of a 'female imagination.' The theory of a female sensibility revealing itself in an imagery and form specific to women always runs dangerously close to reiterating the familiar stereotypes. It also suggests permanence, a deep, basic, and inevitable difference between male and female ways of perceiving the world. I think that, instead, the female literary tradition comes from the still-evolving relationships between women writers and their society. Moreover, the 'female imagination' cannot be treated by literary historians as a romantic or Freudian abstraction. It is the product of a delicate network of influences operating in time, and it must be analyzed as it expresses itself, in language and in a fixed arrangement of words on a page, a form that itself is subject to a network of influences and conventions, including the operations of the marketplace. In this investigation of the English novel, I am intentionally looking, not at an innate sexual attitude, but at the ways in which the self-awareness of the woman writer has translated itself into a literary form in a specific place and time-span, how this self-awareness has changed and developed, and where it might lead.

I am therefore concerned with the professional writer who wants pay and publication, not with the diarist or letter-writer. This emphasis has required careful consideration of the novelists, as well as the novels, chosen for discussion. When we turn from the overview of the literary tradition to look at the individuals who composed it, a different but interrelated set of motives, drives, and sources becomes prominent. I have needed to ask why women began to write for money and how they negotiated the activity of writing within their families. What was their professional self-image? How was their work received, and what effects did criticism have upon them? What were their experiences as women, and how were these reflected in books? What was their understanding of womanhood? What were their relationships to other women, to men, and to their readers? How did changes in women's status affect their lives and careers? And how did the vocation of writing itself change the women who committed themselves to it? In looking at literary subcultures, such as black, Jewish, Canadian, Anglo-Indian, or even American, we can see that they all go through three major phases. First, there is a prolonged phase of *imitation* of the prevailing modes of the

dominant tradition, and *internalization* of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second, there is a phase of *protest* against these standards and values, and *advocacy* of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy. Finally, there is a phase of *self-discovery*, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity.[22] An appropriate terminology for women writers is to call these stages, *Feminine, Feminist*, and *Female*. These are obviously not rigid categories, distinctly separable in time, to which individual writers can be assigned with perfect assurance. The phases overlap; there are feminist elements in feminine writing, and vice versa. One might also find all three phases in the career of a single novelist. Nonetheless, it seems useful to point to periods of crisis when a shift of literary values occurred. In this book I identify the Feminine phase as the period from the appearance of the male pseudonym in the 1840s to the death of George Eliot in 1880; the Feminist phase as 1880 to 1920, or the winning of the vote; and the Female phase as 1920 to the present, but entering a new stage of self-awareness about 1960.

It is important to understand the female subculture not only as what Cynthia Ozick calls 'custodial'[23] – a set of opinions, prejudices, tastes, and values prescribed for a subordinate group to perpetuate its subordination – but also as a thriving and positive entity. Most discussions of women as a subculture have come from historians describing Jacksonian America, but they apply equally well to the situation of early Victorian England. According to Nancy Cott, 'we can view women's group consciousness as a subculture uniquely divided against itself by ties to the dominant culture. While the ties to the dominant culture are the informing and restricting ones, they provoke within the subculture certain strengths as well as weaknesses, enduring values as well as accommodations.'[24] The middle-class ideology of the proper sphere of womanhood, which developed in post-industrial England and America, prescribed a woman who would be a Perfect Lady, an Angel in the House, contentedly submissive to men, but strong in her inner purity and religiosity, queen in her own realm of the Home.[25] Many observers have pointed out that the first professional activities of Victorian women, as social reformers, nurses, governesses, and novelists, either were based in the home or were extensions of the feminine role as teacher, helper, and mother of mankind. In describing the American situation, two historians have seen a subculture emerging from the doctrine of sexual spheres:

> By "subculture" we mean simply "a habit of living" … of a minority group which is self-consciously distinct from the dominant activities, expectations, and values of a society. Historians have seen female church groups, reform associations, and philanthropic activity as expressions of this subculture in actual behavior, while a large and rich body of writing by and for women

> articulated the subculture impulses on the ideational level. Both behavior and thought point to child-rearing, religious activity, education, home life, associationism, and female communality as components of women's subculture. Female friendships, strikingly intimate and deep in this period, formed the actual bonds.[26]

For women in England, the female subculture came first through a shared and increasingly secretive and ritualized physical experience. Puberty, menstruation, sexual initiation, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause – the entire female sexual life cycle – constituted a habit of living that had to be concealed. Although these episodes could not be openly discussed or acknowledged, they were accompanied by elaborate rituals and lore, by external codes of fashion and etiquette, and by intense feelings of female solidarity.[27] Women writers were united by their roles as daughters, wives, and mothers; by the internalized doctrines of evangelicalism, with its suspicion of the imagination and its emphasis on duty; and by legal and economic constraints on their mobility. Sometimes they were united in a more immediate way, around a political cause. On the whole these are the implied unities of culture, rather than the active unities of consciousness.

From the beginning, however, women novelists' awareness of each other and of their female audience showed a kind of covert solidarity that sometimes amounted to a genteel conspiracy. Advocating sisterhood, Sarah Ellis, one of the most conservative writers of the first Victorian generation, asked: 'What should we think of a community of slaves, who betrayed each other's interests? of a little band of shipwrecked mariners upon a friendless shore who were false to each other? of the inhabitants of a defenceless nation, who would not unite together in earnestness and good faith against a common enemy?'[28] Mrs. Ellis felt the binding force of the minority experience for women strongly enough to hint, in the prefaces to her widely read treatises on English womanhood, that her female audience would both read the messages between her lines and refrain from betraying what they deciphered. As another conservative novelist, Dinah Mulock Craik, wrote, 'The intricacies of female nature are incomprehensible except to a woman; and any biographer of real womanly feeling, if ever she discovered, would never dream of publishing them.'[29] Few English women writers openly advocated the use of fiction as revenge against a patriarchal society (as did the American novelist Fanny Fern, for example), but many confessed to sentiments of 'maternal feeling, sisterly affection, *esprit de corps*'[30] for their readers. Thus the clergyman's daughter, going to Mudie's for her three-decker novel by another clergyman's daughter, participated in a cultural exchange that had a special personal significance.

(1977)

Notes

16 *The Making of the English Working Class*, New York, 1973, p. 12.
17 Vineta Colby, *The Singular Anomaly: Women Novelists of the Nineteenth Century*, New York, 1970, p. 11.
18 'Women's Lit: Profession and Tradition,' *Columbia Forum 1* (Fall 1972): 27.
19 Spacks, p. 7.
20 Moers, 'Women's Lit.' 28.
21 'Flying Pigs and Double Standards,' *Times Literary Supplement*, (July 26, 1974): 784.
22 For helpful studies of literary subcultures, see Robert A. Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, New York, 1958; and Northrop Frye, 'Conclusion to *A Literary History of Canada*,' in *The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society*, Ithaca, 1970, pp. 278–312.
23 'Women and Creativity,' p. 442.
24 Nancy F. Cott, introduction to *Root of Bitterness*, New York, 1972, pp. 3–4.
25 For the best discussions of the Victorian feminine ideal, see Françoise Basch, 'Contemporary Ideologies,' in *Relative Creatures*, pp. 3–15; Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, New Haven, 1957, pp. 341–3; and Alexander Welsh's theory of the Angel in the House in *The City of Dickens*, London, 1971, pp. 164–95.
26 Christine Stansell and Johnny Faragher, 'Women and Their Families on the Overland Trail, 1842–1867,' *Feminist Studies* 11 (1975): 152–3. For an overview of recent historical scholarship on the 'two cultures,' see Barbara Sicherman, 'Review: American History.' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1 (Winter 1975): 470–84.
27 For a sociological account of patterns of behavior for Victorian women, see Leonore Davidoff, *The Best Circles: Society, Etiquette and the Season*, London, 1973, esp. pp. 48–58, 85–100.
28 Sarah Ellis, *The Daughters of England*, New York, 1844, ch. ix, p. 90.
29 Dinah M. Craik, 'Literary Ghouls,' *Studies from Life*, New York, n.d., p. 13.
30 Letter of October 6, 1851, in *Letters of E. Jewsbury to Jane Welsh Carlyle*, ed. Mrs. Alex Ireland, London, 1892, p. 426. For Fanny Fern, see Ann Douglas Wood, 'The "Scribbling Women" and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote,' *American Quarterly* XXIII (Spring 1971): 1–24.

Adrienne Rich

'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence'

III

I have chosen to use the term *lesbian existence* and *lesbian continuum* because the word *lesbianism* has a clinical and limiting ring. *Lesbian existence* suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence. I mean the term *lesbian*

continuum to include a range – through each woman's life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support, if we can also hear in it such associations as *marriage resistance* and the 'haggard' behavior identified by Mary Daly (obsolete meanings: 'intractable,' 'willful,' 'wanton,' and 'unchaste' … 'a woman reluctant to yield to wooing')[45] – we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of 'lesbianism.'

Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women. But it is more than these, although we may first begin to perceive it as a form of nay-saying to patriarchy, an act of resistance. It has of course included isolation, self-hatred, breakdown, alcoholism, suicide, and intrawoman violence; we romanticize at our peril what it means to love and act against the grain, and under heavy penalties; and lesbian existence has been lived (unlike, say, Jewish or Catholic existence) without access to any knowledge of a tradition, a continuity, a social underpinning. The destruction of records and memorabilia and letters documenting the realities of lesbian existence must be taken very seriously as a means of keeping heterosexuality compulsory for women, since what has been kept from our knowledge is joy, sensuality, courage, and community, as well as guilt, self-betrayal, and pain.[46]

Lesbians have historically been deprived of a political existence through 'inclusion' as female versions of male homosexuality. To equate lesbian existence with male homosexuality because each is stigmatized is to erase female reality once again. Part of the history of lesbian existence is, obviously, to be found where lesbians, lacking a coherent female community, have shared a kind of social life and common cause with homosexual men. But there are differences: women's lack of economic and cultural privilege relative to men; qualitative differences in female and male relationships, for example, the patterns of anonymous sex among male homosexuals, and the pronounced ageism in male homosexual standards of sexual attractiveness. I perceive the lesbian experience as being, like motherhood, a profoundly *female* experience, with particular oppressions, meanings, and potentialities we cannot comprehend as long as we simply bracket it with other sexually stigmatized existences. Just as the term 'parenting' serves to conceal the particular and significant reality of being a parent who is actually a mother, the term 'gay' may serve the purpose of blurring the very outlines we need to discern, which are of crucial value for feminism and for the freedom of women as a group.[47]

As the term 'lesbian' has been held to limiting, clinical associations in its patriarchal definition, female friendship and comradeship have been set apart from the erotic, thus limiting the erotic itself. But as we deepen and broaden the range of what we define as lesbian existence, as we delineate a lesbian continuum, we begin to discover the erotic in female terms: as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself; as an energy not only diffuse but, as Audre Lorde has described it, omnipresent in 'the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic,' and in the sharing of work; as the empowering joy which 'makes us less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.'[48] In another context, writing of women and work, I quoted the autobiographical passage in which the poet H. D. described how her friend Bryher supported her in persisting with the visionary experience which was to shape her mature work:

> … I knew that this experience, this writing-on-the-wall before me, could not be shared with anyone except the girl who stood so bravely there beside me. This girl had said without hesitation, "Go on." It was she really who had the detachment and integrity of the Pythoness of Delphi. But it was I, battered and dissociated … who was seeing the pictures, and who was reading the writing or granted the inner vision. Or perhaps, in some sense, we were "seeing" it together, for without her, admittedly, I could not have gone on.…[49]

If we consider the possibility that all women – from the infant suckling her mother's breast, to the grown woman experiencing orgasmic sensations while suckling her own child, perhaps recalling her mother's milk-smell in her own; to two women, like Virginia Woolf's Chloe and Olivia, who share a laboratory;[50] to the woman dying at ninety, touched and handled by women – exist on a lesbian continuum, we can see ourselves as moving in and out of this continuum, whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not.

We can then connect aspects of woman identification as diverse as the impudent, intimate girl-friendships of eight-or nine-year olds and the banding together of those women of the twelfth and fifteenth centuries known as Beguines who 'shared houses, rented to one another, bequeathed houses to their room-mates … in cheap subdivided houses in the artisans' area of town,' who 'practiced Christian virtue on their own, dressing and living simply and not associating with men,' who earned their livings as spinners, bakers, nurses, or ran schools for young girls, and who managed – until the Church forced them to disperse – to live independent both of marriage and of conventual restrictions.[51] It allows us to connect these women with the more celebrated 'Lesbians' of the women's school around Sappho of the seventh century BC; with the secret sororities and economic networks

reported among African women; and with the Chinese marriage resistance sisterhoods – communities of women who refused marriage, or who if married often refused to consummate their marriages and soon left their husbands – the only women in China who were not footbound and who, Agnes Smedley tells us, welcomed the births of daughters and organized successful women's strikes in the silk mills.[52] It allows us to connect and compare disparate individual instances of marriage resistance: for example, the type of autonomy claimed by Emily Dickinson, a nineteenth-century white woman genius, with the strategies available to Zora Neale Hurston, a twentieth-century black woman genius. Dickinson never married, had tenuous intellectual friendships with men, lived self-convented in her genteel father's house in Amherst, and wrote a lifetime of passionate letters to her sister-in-law Sue Gilbert and a smaller group of such letters to her friend Kate Scott Anthon. Hurston married twice but soon left each husband, scrambled her way from Florida to Harlem to Columbia University to Haiti and finally back to Florida, moved in and out of white patronage and poverty, professional success, and failure; her survival relationships were all with women, beginning with her mother. Both of these women in their vastly different circumstances were marriage resisters, committed to their own work and selfhood, and were later characterized as 'apolitical.' Both were drawn to men of intellectual quality; for both of them women provided the on-going fascination and sustenance of life.

(1980)

Notes

45 Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, p. 15.

46 'In a hostile world in which women are not supposed to survive except in relation with and in service to men, entire communities of women were simply erased. History tends to bury what it seeks to reject' (Blanche W. Cook, ' "Women Alone Stir My Imagination": Lesbianism and the Cultural Tradition,' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 4, no. 4 [Summer 1979]: 719–20). The Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City is one attempt to preserve contemporary documents on lesbian existence – a project of enormous value and meaning, working against the continuing censorship and obliteration of relationships, networks, communities, in other archives and elsewhere in the culture.

47 [A. R., 1986: The shared historical and spiritual 'crossover' functions of lesbians and gay men in cultures past and present are traced by Judy Grahn in *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds* (Boston: Beacon, 1984). I now think we have much to learn both from the uniquely female aspects of lesbian existence and from the complex 'gay' identity we share with gay men.]

48 Audre Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* in *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984).
49 Adrienne Rich, 'Conditions for Work: The Common World of Women,' in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (p. 209); H. D., *Tribute to Freud* (Oxford: Carcanet Press, 1971), pp. 50–4.
50 Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 126.
51 Gracia Clark, 'The Beguines: A Mediaeval Women's Community,' *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (1975): 73–80.
52 See Denise Paulme, ed., *Women of Tropical Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), pp. 7, 266–7. Some of these sororities are described as 'a kind of defensive syndicate against the male element' – their aims being 'to offer concerted resistance to an oppressive patriarchate,' 'independence in relation to one's husband and with regard to motherhood, mutual aid, satisfaction of personal revenge.' See also Audre Lorde, 'Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving,' in *Sister Outsider* pp. 45–52; Marjorie Topley, 'Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung,' in *Women in Chinese Society*, ed. M. Wolf and R. Witke (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1978), pp. 67–89; Agnes Smedley, *Portraits of Chinese Women in Revolution*, ed. J. MacKinnon and S. MacKinnon (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1976), pp. 103–10.

Chris Weedon

Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory

Similar questions need to be asked of feminist criticism which is concerned with discovering particular women's experience in women's writing. At the present time attempts are being made to describe black and lesbian female experience as expressed in women's writing and to construct traditions of black and lesbian women's writing. As with all traditions, readers assume that texts are connected, that earlier writers influence later ones and that the analysis of such influences comes before the detailed historical location of women's writing within the specific social relations of cultural production, structured by class, gender and race, which produce texts.

The problems facing this approach are at their most extreme in the case of lesbian writing and the construction of a lesbian aesthetic and tradition expressing a lesbian experience. Not only does this project share the problems of approaches which assume that texts express women's experience, it is also faced with the primary problem of defining lesbian texts. In her overview of lesbian-feminist literary criticism, written in 1981, Bonnie Zimmerman addresses the complexities of these issues. She points out that contemporary discourses of lesbianism are wide-ranging. They include the exclusive definition of lesbianism as a sexual practice, the extension of the term lesbian to all 'woman-identified experience' as in the work of

Adrienne Rich, or some point between the two. Zimmerman herself endorses Lillian Faderman's definition in *Surpassing the Love of Men* (Faderman, 1981):

> 'Lesbian' describes a relationship in which two women's strongest emotions and affections are directed toward each other. Sexual contact may be part of the relationship to a greater or lesser degree, or it may be entirely absent. By preference the two women spend most of their time together and share most aspects of their lives … with each other. (Faderman in Showalter, [*The New Feminist Criticism*] 1985, p. 206)

This definition may indeed serve the interests of current lesbian research and attempts to construct a lesbian tradition. It is important to remember, however, that it is a contemporary definition and that the meaning of lesbianism changes with historical shifts in the discursive construction of female sexuality. The different meanings of lesbianism in the past gave rise to different forms of oppression and resistance, knowledge of which helps to denaturalize the present and sharpen our awareness of the contemporary modes through which gender and sexual power are exercised.

As a group who are socially defined by others in terms of a sexual preference which is not heterosexual and therefore not 'normal', lesbians write from different subject positions than most heterosexual feminists. It is not impossible for heterosexual women to occupy fundamentally anti-heterosexist discourses but this takes a political commitment beyond their own immediate day-to-day interests. While all feminists would agree 'that a woman's identity is not defined only by her relation to a male world and a male literary tradition … that powerful bonds between women are a crucial factor in women's lives' (Showalter, 1985, p. 201), this is not enough to counter a heterosexism which is a fundamental structuring principle of discourses of gender and the social practices which they imply.

If it is difficult to decide on the meaning of lesbianism in women, a decision which can only ultimately be political, determined by present and future objectives, the question of what constitutes a lesbian text is equally open to a range of answers: 'This critic will need to consider whether a lesbian text is one written by a lesbian (and if so, how do we determine who is a lesbian?), one written about lesbians (which might be by a heterosexual woman or man), or one that expresses a lesbian 'vision' (which has to be satisfactorily outlined) (Zimmerman in Showalter, 1985, p. 208).

The questions asked by self-defined lesbian critics tend to focus on the relationship between author and text. Zimmerman, for example, assumes that 'the sexual and emotional orientation of a woman profoundly affects her consciousness and thus her creativity' (Showalter, 1985, p. 201). While this is very likely to be the case, we cannot know the intimate details of an author's consciousness; at best we have access to the competing range of

subject positions open to her at a particular historical moment. Moreover we cannot look to authorial consciousness for the meaning of a text, since this is always open to plural readings which are themselves the product of specific discursive contexts.

Alternatively lesbianism in fiction can be seen in terms of textual strategies as, for example, in Barbara Smith's exposition of Toni Morrison's *Sula* in the same volume of essays (Showalter, 1985, pp. 168–84). There is a danger, however, of masking important and productive differences by assuming that fiction which contests particular forms of heterosexual practice and family life is necessarily lesbian in its implications.

How we define lesbianism and how we read lesbian texts will depend on how we define our objectives. Bonnie Zimmerman opts for a 'lesbian "essence" that may be located in all these specific historical existences, just as we may speak of a widespread perhaps universal structure of marriage or the family' (Showalter, 1985, pp. 215–16). She stresses, however, that 'differences are as significant as similarities'. If we are searching for positive lesbian role models or for a recognizable lesbian aesthetic, then a fixed concept of lesbianism is important. From a post-structuralist perspective, however, this fixing is always historically specific and temporary and will determine in advance the type of answers we get to our questions. If we want to understand and challenge past and present heterosexism we need to start from the discourses which constitute it and the forms of sexuality, sexual regulation and gendered subjectivity which they construct. We need to look for the possibilities of challenge and resistance to specific modes of heterosexuality. Fictional texts play their part in this process.

Ann Ducille

'The Rise of Black Feminist Literary Studies'
The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory

But there was something else about the critical practice that began to call itself "feminist" in the 1970s. While it took back, blackened, and politicized the term, it did not historicize it by connecting it to the pioneering black feminists of the nineteenth century, with the possible exception of Sojourner Truth. Still in the revolutionary mode of the 1960s, black feminist literary studies shot from the hip-huggers in the beginning. When it did become anxious enough about its origins to go back in search of its mothers' gardens – to use Alice Walker's metaphor – it too often stopped at the front porch of Zora Neale Hurston, the self-proclaimed queen of the Harlem Renaissance, who had died in 1960 out of print and out of favor. Replicating the great author/great book model of mainstream canon construction, the

new black feminist criticism resurrected Hurston as its literary fore-mother and her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as its classic text in much the same way that white feminist criticism had reclaimed Kate Chopin and *The Awakening* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *The Yellow Wallpaper*. And like its white counterpart, it often reconstructed its picked-to-click precursor in a cultural and intellectual vacuum that treated her as if she gave birth to herself, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and the entire identifiable tradition of black women writers.

What was often lost or at least overshadowed in the translation was the work of Hurston's precursors and contemporaries such as Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Nella Larsen, Dorothy West, Marita Bonner, and Jessie Fauset, and of other black women writers whose settings are urban or whose characters are middle class. (There are striking similarities between Dunbar-Nelson's unpublished novella, "A Modern Undine," and Hurston's fourth novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee* [1948], suggesting an anxiety of influence that, to my knowledge, no one has yet explored.) Also largely missing in action in this emerging discourse in the early 1970s was the fiction of a number of nineteenth-century black women writers. There is considerable irony in this last elision in particular because these early writers had already fought some of the same battles over sexism and racism, over failed sisterhood and the double jeopardy of race and gender difference, and over the exclusionary practices of the black male and white female communities that should have been allies. Not only had their black feminist ancestors traversed similar ground, they had also come to similar conclusions about the need for self-expression, self-representation, and, in a manner of speaking, self-publication. And they, too, had undertaken their own efforts to combat stereotypical representations of black womanhood by publishing their own counter-narratives.

In particular, the 1890s (what Harper dubbed the "Woman's Era") was the site of furious literary activity on the part of African American women similar to the productivity of the 1970s, but, if anything, written against an even stiffer grain and published against even greater odds. In the 1970s and 1980s black women were a commodity on the cusp of becoming in vogue, though by no means in power, in the academy and the publishing industry. In the 1890s black women were not in favor with anyone anywhere, except perhaps within the separate women's clubs, political organizations, and educational networks they built to continue the fight for both racial and gender justice. Their crusades intensified and solidified at the turn of the century in the wake of the failures of Reconstruction, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, the proliferation of lynch law and Jim Crow, and the increasingly patriarchal character of their own black communities.

Challenging the white male authority and racist characterizations of plantation tradition writers like Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson

Page, Pauline Hopkins, writer, political activist, and literary editor of the *Colored American Magazine*, urged black women and men to use literature as an instrument of liberation. "*No one will do this for us*," she wrote in the introduction to her first novel, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (1900); "*we must ourselves develop the men and women who will faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro with all the fire and romance which lie dormant in our history*, and, as yet unrecognized by writers of the Anglo-Saxon race."[29]

In attempting to help "raise the stigma of degradation" from the race, Hopkins's "little romance" tackles all the major political and social crises of the day: the systematic rape and sexual exploitation of black women, lynching and other mob violence, women's rights, job discrimination, and black disenfranchisement. Much the same is true for the fiction, prose, and poetry of Frances Harper, whose body of work consistently addresses the interplay of racial and sexual ideology. Published in 1892, the same year as Ida B. Wells's antilynching manifesto *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law and All Its Phases* and Anna Julia Cooper's feminist manifesto *A Voice from the South*, Harper's political novel *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted* was long believed to be the first novel published by an African American woman. But even before it was dislodged from its premier position by the recovery of *Our Nig* and other earlier novels (Amelia Johnson's *Clarence and Corinne* [1890] and Emma Dunham Kelley's *Megda* [1891]), and eventually three other earlier novels by Harper herself, *Iola Leroy* garnered little cultural capital from the designation "first."[30]

There are, of course, exceptions to the tendency to ignore the black feminist past – the work of Frances Smith Foster, for one, and later Claudia Tate and Carby. More often, however, early black feminist criticism either ignores nineteenth-century writers like Harper and Hopkins or dismisses them for writing sentimental fiction in the Anglo-American mode – "courtesy book[s] intended for white reading and black instruction," Houston Baker calls them, even though the stated audience for many of these works is the black community.[31] Unlike Hurston's colorful prose (whose misogyny was overlooked or explained away), their fiction was condemned for not being authentically black or feminist enough, despite its consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual institutions of racism, rape, sexual blackmail, lynching, and, in some instances, marriage itself.

In 1988 the Schomburg Library, in conjunction with Oxford University Press, reissued dozens of previously lost and out-of-print texts by nineteenth-century African American women. Gates, the general editor of the collection, noted in his foreword that black women published more fiction between 1890 and 1910 than black men had published in the preceding half-century. He questioned why this "great achievement" had been ignored.

"For reasons unclear to me even today," he wrote, "few of these marvelous renderings of the Afro-American woman's consciousness were reprinted in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when so many other texts of the Afro-American literary tradition were resurrected from the dark and silent graveyards of the out-of-print and were reissued in facsimile editions aimed at the hungry readership for canonical texts in the nascent field of black studies."[32]

Gates may not know why so few of these renderings were taken up in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but there are some obvious possible answers. It is not just that many of these texts were accessible only in rare book rooms, as Gates acknowledges. It is also – perhaps even more so – that these books were known only through their *mis*readings and through the bad rap that the "women's fiction" of the period had received historically, mostly at the hands of male critics – white and black. But an even fuller answer to Gates's conundrum may lie in that nagging word "tradition." None of this nineteenth-century fiction easily fits within the 1970s model of an identifiable black feminist literary tradition, a tradition that, by definition, privileges the "authentic" voices and experiences of black women of the rural South such as Hurston's heroine Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Articulating the sentiments of many black feminist critics, Sherley Anne Williams invokes this privilege in her preface to the 1978 reprint of *Their Eyes*, where she describes her discovery of the novel in graduate school as a close textual encounter that made her Hurston's for life. "In the speech of her characters I heard my own country voice and saw in the heroine something of my own country self. And this last was most wonderful because it was most rare."[33]

Self-expression as a cultural imperative is one thing, but however wonderful, however rare, self-recognition as a critical prescription is inherently limiting and exclusionary. Written in an intellectual rather than a vernacular tradition – in the master's tongue rather than the folk's – nineteenth-century narratives contain neither the specifically black female language nor the valorized black female activities that Barbara Smith identified as emblems of authentic black womanhood. In other words, within the 1970s black feminist dream of a common language, this early writing was judged grammatically incorrect, out of step with the established tempo of the literary tradition. Ironically, however, this canon construction of the close encounter kind also excluded some of the work by the very same writer it had claimed as its founding mother, Zora Neale Hurston. While Hurston's second novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, was heralded as the quintessential black feminist text, her fourth novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, was panned along with nineteenth-century narratives like *Iola Leroy* and *Contending Forces* because of its move away from folklore and its focus on white characters instead of black.[34] Inexplicably, by the logic of 1970s

and 1980s canon construction, Hurston was a card-carrying black feminist writer when she published *Their Eyes* in 1937 but not when she published *Seraph* in 1948.

(2006)

Notes

29 Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (Boston: Colored Co-operative Publishing House, 1900), pp. 13–14; reprinted with an introduction by Richard Yarborough (New York: Oxford University Press in conjunction with the Schomburg Library, 1988). Emphasis in the original.

30 In the early 1990s, more than a hundred years after *Iola Leroy* first appeared, Frances Smith Foster recovered and brought back into print three long-lost novels by Frances Harper, all of which were originally serialized in the *Christian Recorder*, the journal of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Through years of painstaking research and detective work, Foster managed to piece together most of the texts of each of the lost novels: *Minnie's Sacrifice*, which was serialized in twenty installments between March 20 and September 25, 1869; *Sowing and Reaping*, which ran from August 1876 to February 1877; and *Trial and Triumph*, which appeared between October of 1888 and February of 1889. See Frances Smith Foster, ed., *Minnie's Sacrifice, Sowing and Reaping, Trial and Triumph: Three Rediscovered Novels by Frances E. W. Harper* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994. Recent evidence suggests that Kelley may not have been black.

31 Houston A. Baker, Jr, *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 32.

32 Henry Louis Gates, Jr, foreword to *The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. xix.

33 Sherley Anne Williams, foreword to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Bloomington: University of Illinois Press, 1978), p. vii.

34 For example, Alice Walker, who was so instrumental in reclaiming *Their Eyes Were Watching God* from obscurity, condemned Hurston's later work as "reactionary, static, shockingly misguided and timid." This is particularly true of *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Walker maintains, "which is not even about black people, which is no crime, but *is* about white people for whom it is impossible to care, which is." In his definitive literary history, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, Bernard Bell asserts that Hurston's focus on white characters places *Seraph* outside the scope of his study, suggesting that black writers can focus only on black characters. See Alice Walker, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View," in Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984); and Bernard Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987).

Paul Lauter

'Race and Gender in the Shaping of the American Literary Canon: A Case Study from the Twenties'
Feminist Criticism and Social Change

Demographic factors were also at work, as historian Laurence Veysey has pointed out. The proportion 'of the mature working-age population in America' who were college and university professors and librarians was rising 'spectacularly' in the decades leading to 1920 – especially in relation to older, static learned professionals, like doctors, lawyers and the clergy. Although they constituted only a tiny portion of people at work, professors had enormously larger impact 'as the universities increasingly took over training for a wide variety of prestigious occupations'. In fact, Veysey writes that

> the social effect of intellectual specialization [occurring in universities among other areas of American life] was to transfer authority, most critically over the printed word and what was taught in colleges to sons and daughters of the elite, away from the cultivated professions considered as an entirety and toward a far smaller, specially trained segment within them, those who now earned Ph.D. degrees.... Concretely, this meant vesting such authority in a group that, as of 1900, numbered only a few hundred persons spread across the humanistic fields. The immediate effect was thus the intensification of elitism as it was transferred onto a new academic basis. A double requirement was now imposed – intellectual merit, at least of a certain kind, defined far more rigorously, as well as a continuing expectation of social acceptability.[19]

In short, the professoriat exercised increasing control of the definition of a 'literate' reader, including those who were to become the next generation's writers.[20]

The social base of that professoriat was small. The professors, educators, critics, the arbiters of taste of the 1920s, were, for the most part, college-educated white men of Anglo-Saxon or northern European origins. They came, that is, from that tiny, élite portion of the population of the United States which, around the turn of the century, could go to college. Through the first two decades of the new century, this dominant élite had faced a quickening demand for some power and control over their lives from Slavic, Jewish, Mediterranean and Catholic immigrants from Europe, as well as from black immigrants from the rural South. Even women had renewed their demand for the vote, jobs, control over their bodies. The old élite and their allies moved on a variety of fronts, especially during and just after World War I, to set the terms on which these demands would be accommodated. They repressed, in actions like the Prohibition Amendment and the Palmer raids, the political and social, as well as the cultural, institutions of

immigrants and of radicals. They reorganized schools and professionalized elementary and secondary school curriculum development, in significant measure as a way to impose middle-class American 'likemindedness' on a heterogeneous, urban, working-class population.[21] Similarly, calling it 'professionalization', they reorganized literary scholarship and teaching in ways that not only asserted a male-centered culture and values for the college-educated leadership, but also enhanced their own authority and status as well.[22]

The Modern Language Association, for example, underwent a major reorganization just after World War I, the effect of which was to concentrate professional influence in the hands of groups of specialists, most of whom met at the annual convention. The convention thus took on much greater significance, practically and symbolically in terms of defining professional leadership. As professionalism replaced gentility, the old all-male 'smoker' at the convention was discontinued. With it also disappeared a female and, on occasion, modestly feminist institution: the ladies' dinner. We do not fully know how, or even in this instance whether, such institutions provided significant support for women scholars, nor do we know what was lost with their disappearance in the 1920s.[23] Clearly, women were left without any significant organizational base within the newly important convention. For when, in 1921, specialized groups were established for MLA conventions, women's roles in them were disproportionately small, minor and largely confined.[24] If the men gave up the social institution that had helped sustain their control, they replaced it with professional authority in the new groups. Not only were women virtually excluded from leadership positions in them and given few opportunities to read papers, but they also appear to have been pushed toward – as men were certainly pushed away from – subject areas considered 'peripheral' to the profession. For example, folk materials and works *by* women became particularly the province *of* women – as papers, dissertation topics and published articles illustrate.[25]

As white women were excluded from the emerging scholarly power structures, and blacks – female or male – were kept almost entirely ghettoized in black colleges, 'their subjects', women and blacks, remained undeveloped in a rapidly developing profession. For example, in the first ten years of its existence, *American Literature* published twenty-four full articles (as distinct from Notes and Queries or Reviews) by women scholars out of a total of 208. Nine of these appeared in the first two volumes, and a number of women published more than once. An article on Dickinson appeared in volume 1, and others in volumes 4 and 6. These apart, the *only* article on a woman writer until volume 10 was one on American comments, mostly by men, on George Sand. In volume 10 one finds a piece, by a male scholar, on Cather, as well as another trying to show that Ann Cotton derived her material from husband John. It is not, I should add, that the journal confined

itself to 'major' writers or to authors from the early or mid-nineteenth century. Quite the contrary, it ran pieces on stalwarts like John Pendleton Kennedy, not to speak of *Godey's Ladies' Book*, as well as articles dealing with a number of twentieth-century male authors.

While professionalization was thus erecting institutional barriers against women, their status was being attacked in other ways. Joan Doran Hedrick has shown how the ideology of domesticity and the bogey of 'race suicide', which re-emerged around the turn of the century, was used during the next thirty years to attack women teachers, both the proverbial spinster schoolmarm and the female college professor.[26] The extent to which such attacks arose from the pressure of job competition, general political conservatism, antisuffrage backlash or other factors is not yet clear. It was true, however, that women had not only been competing more and more effectively for positions in the humanities, but also that the predominance of women students in undergraduate literature courses had long worried the male professoriat. In 1909, for example, the chairman of the MLA's Central Division had devoted his address to the problem of 'Coeducation and literature'. He wondered whether the predominance of women taking literary courses 'may not contribute to shape the opinion that literature is preeminently a study for girls, and tend to discourage some men.... This is not yet saying,' he continued, 'that the preference of women turns away that of men. There are many factors to the problem. But it looks that way.' How, he asked, can we deal with the problem that the 'masculine ideal of culture' has largely rejected what the modern languages, and we as its professors, have to offer? 'What may we teachers do more or better than we have done to gain for the humanities as represented by literature a larger place in the notion of masculine culture?'[27]

Something of an answer is provided in an unusually frank way in the *Annual Reports* of Oberlin College for 1919–20. In the section on the faculty, Professor Jelliffe, on behalf of Bibliography, Language, Literature and Art, urged the hiring of an additional teacher of composition. He writes:

> In my opinion the new instructor, when appointed, should be a man. Of sixteen sections in Composition only three are at present being taught by men instructors. This is to discredit, in the opinion of our students, the importance of the subject, for despite the excellent teaching being done by the women of the English faculty, the students are quick to infer that the work is considered by the faculty itself of less importance than that to which the men devote their time.[28]

Such ideas, the institutional processes I have described, and other historical forces outside the scope of the paper, gradually eroded the gains women had made in higher education in the decades immediately following the turn of

the century. By the early 1920s, women were earning 16 per cent of all doctorates; that proportion gradually declined (except for the war years) to under 10 per cent in the 1950s. Similarly, the proportion of women in the occupational category of college presidents, professors and instructors rose from 6.4 per cent in 1900 to 32.5 per cent around 1930, but subsequently declined to below 22 per cent by 1960.[29] The proportion of women earning advanced degrees in the modern languages and teaching these subjects in colleges was, of course, always somewhat higher, but the decline affected those fields in a similar way. Because more women were educated in these fields, they were particularly vulnerable in the 1930s to cutbacks ostensibly instituted to preserve jobs for male 'breadwinners' or to nepotism regulations newly coined to spread available positions among the men. Not surprisingly, by the 1950s only 19 per cent of the doctorates being earned in the modern languages were awarded to women,[30] a proportion higher than in fields like sociology, history or biology, but significantly lower than it had been thirty years earlier. As a result, the likelihood of one's encountering a female professor even in literature – and especially at élite male or coeducational institutions – was perhaps even slighter than the chances of encountering a female writer.

Blacks, female or male, faced a color line that professionalization did nothing to dispel. Black professors of literature were, for the most part, separated into their own professional organization, the College Language Association, and into positions at segregated black colleges. The color line persisted in *American Literature* so far as articles on black writers were concerned, until 1971, when the magazine printed its first piece, on James Weldon Johnson. The outlook apparently shared by *American Literature*'s editors comes clearest in a brief review (vol. 10 (1938), pp. 112–13) by Vernon Loggins, then at Columbia, of Benjamin Brawley's collection of *Early Negro American Writers*.

> The volume … gives a hint of American Negro literature before Dunbar, but scarcely more than a hint. Yet it should be of practical value in American literature courses in *Negro colleges*. Professor Brawley obviously had such an aim in mind in making the compilation. [Italics mine]

Over the years a few articles appeared on images of blacks in the writings of white authors, but in general, as such reviews and notes on scholarly articles make clear, those interested in black writers were effectively referred to the *Journal of Negro History* or to the *College Language Association Journal*.[31]

Although the existence of such black professional organizations and periodicals reflected the pervasiveness of institutional racism in American life, such black-defined groups and magazines like the *Crisis* had at least the

advantage of providing black writers and scholars with outlets for and encouragement of their work. Women, especially white professional writers, faced rather a different problem in this period: one can observe a significant shift in cultural authority from female-defined to male-defined institutions – in symbolic terms, one might say, from women's literary societies to *Esquire* magazine. The analogy may, at first, seem far-fetched, but it is probably more accurate than the cartoon view of women's clubs with which we have lived since the 1920s. In fact, the taste of the older generation of genteel professors and magazine editors largely accorded with that of the female literary clubs; the outlook of the new professoriat and *Esquire*, the *Playboy* of its day, largely coincided, at least with respect to the subjects and writers of fiction, as well as to certain conceptions of male camaraderie and culture.[32] To understand why, we must now turn to the aesthetic theories which helped to shape the canon.

(1983)

Notes

19 Laurence Veysey, 'The humanities, 1860–1920', typescript of paper for volume on the professions, c. 1974, pp. 21, 24.

20 Pattee remarks that 'American literature today is in the hands of college-educated men and women. The professor has molded the producers of it'. See Pattee, *Tradition and Jazz*, p. 237.

21 Barry M. Franklin, 'American curriculum theory and the problem of social control, 1918–1938' (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, 15–19 April 1974), ERIC, ED 092 419. Franklin quotes Edward A. Ross, *Principles of Sociology* (New York: Century, 1920): 'Thoroughly to nationalize a multitudinous people calls for institutions to disseminate certain ideas and ideals. The Tsars relied on the blue-domed Orthodox church in every peasant village to Russify their heterogeneous subjects, while we Americans rely for unity on the "little red school house".'

22 Whatever its ostensible objectives, in practice, professionalization almost invariably worked to the detriment of female practitioners – and often female 'clients' as well. The details of this argument have been most fully worked out for medicine; see, for example, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Complaints and Disorders: The sexual politics of sickness* (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1973), and *For Her Own Good: One hundred and fifty years of the experts' advice to women* (New York: Pantheon, 1979). See also Janice Law Trecker, 'Sex, science and education', *American Quarterly* 26 (October 1974): pp. 352–66; and Margaret W. Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America: Struggles and strategies to 1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), especially the chapters titled 'A manly profession', pp. 73–99, which includes a wonderful discussion of the professionally exclusionary function of the male 'smoker', and 'Academic employment: protest and prestige', pp. 160–217.

23 The ladies' dinner had disappeared by 1925. A good deal of work on female cultures of support has recently been published, beginning with Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The female world of love and ritual: relations between women in nineteenth-century America', *Signs* 1 (Autumn 1975), pp. 1–27. In another professional field, history, women apparently felt so excluded from the mainstream and in need of mutual support that in 1929 they formed the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, an institution extended in the 1970s to include sponsorship of a large conference on women's history. In most academic fields, however, while the proportion of *individual* women obtaining doctorates might have increased or been stable during the 1920s, female-defined *organizations* seem virtually to have disappeared – and with them, I suspect, centers for women's influence.

24 From 1923 on, the MLA gathered in what was called a 'union' meeting, rather than in separate conventions of the Eastern, Central and Pacific divisions – another indication of the new importance of the convention. That year 467 registered as attending the session. Fifty-nine women attended the ladies' dinner; some of the women were probably wives and other women members probably did not attend. About 24 per cent of the MLA members were female; very likely a smaller proportion attended the convention. Among the divisions and sections there were 37 male chairpersons, and 1 female, Louise Pound, who chaired the Popular Culture section. There were 29 male secretaires, and 1 woman, Helen Sandison, served as secretary for two sections. Of the 108 papers, 6 were delivered by women.

In 1924, 978 persons registered, and 121 women went to the ladies' dinner. There continued to be 1 female chairperson, Louise Pound, and now 43 men. The female secretarial corps had increased to 5, Helen Sandison still serving twice, and 'Mrs Carleton Brown' now serving as secretary for the Phonetics section. Of the 128 papers, 7 were by women.

In *PMLA*, the proportion of women remained, relatively, much higher. In 1924, women were 7 of 47 authors; in 1925, 9 of 47; and in 1926, 11 of 55.

25 For example, of those seven papers delivered by women in the 1924 MLA meeting, two were in Popular Literature, two on Phonetics – where, perhaps not incidentally, women were officers – one in American Literature. Similarly, the entry for American Literature prepared by Norman Foerster for the 1922 American Bibliography (*PMLA*, 1923) contains one paragraph devoted to works about Indian verse, black writers and popular ballads. Four of the scholars cited in this paragraph are women, 5 are men. Otherwise, 58 men and 9 women scholars are cited in the article. Of the 9 women, 2 wrote on women authors, 2 are cobibliographers and 1 wrote on Whittier's love affair.

26 Joan Doran Hedrick, 'Sex, class, and ideology: the declining birthrate in America, 1870–1917', unpublished MS, c. 1974. Hedrick demonstrates that many of the sociologists and educators who developed the idea of utilizing curriculum for social control were involved with the supposed problem of 'race suicide' and active in efforts to restrict immigration as well as to return women to the home.

27 A. G. Canfield, 'Coeducation and literature', *PMLA* 25 (1910), pp. lxxix–lxxx, lxxxiii.

28 *Annual Reports of the President and the Treasurer of Oberlin College for 1919–20* (Oberlin, Ohio: Oberlin College, 10 December 1920), pp. 231–2.

29 Rudolph C. Blitz, 'Women in the professions, 1870–1970', *Monthly Labor Review* 97 (5 May 1974): pp. 37–8. See also Pamela Roby, 'Institutional barriers to women students in higher education', in *Academic Women on the Move*, ed. Alice S Rossi and Ann Calderwood (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1973), pp. 37–40; and Michael J. Carter and Susan Boslego Carter, 'Women's recent progress in the professions, or, Women get a ticket to ride after the gravy train has left the station', *Feminist Studies* 7 (Fall 1981), pp. 477–504.

30 Laura Morlock, 'Discipline variation in the status of academic women', in *Academic Women on the Move*, pp. 255–309.

31 In 1951, the Committee on Trends in Research of the American Literature Group circulated a report on research and publications about American authors during 1940–50, together with some notes on publications during the previous decade. For the 1885–1950 period, the report (basing itself on categories established by the *Literary History of the United States*) provided information on ninety-five 'major authors'. Of these, four were black: Charles Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright – in context a surprisingly 'large' number. Chesnutt is one of the few of the ninety-five about whom no articles are listed for either period; for Dunbar, one three-page article is listed and a 'popular' book; for Hughes, there are four articles, two by Hughes himself. Only Wright had been the subject of a significant number of essays. Among 'minor authors', as defined by *LHUS*, Countee Cullen had two articles, totaling five pages, written about him; W. E. B. DuBois nothing; and James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay and Jean Toomer, among others, were not even listed. Available in Modern Language Association, American Literature Group Files, University of Wisconsin Memorial Library Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

32 One suggestive illustration.

> I was pleased to get your letter and hear about the hunting. I don't know whether you realize how fortunate you people are to live where the game is still more plentiful than the hunters. It is no fun up here where hunting frequently resembles a shooting duel.
>
> I am vastly amused by the report of the situation of the good and important woman who thought we should have more women on our committees in the American Literature Group.… Beyond … [Louise Pound and Constance Rourke] I cannot think of another woman in the country who has contributed sufficiently to be placed on a par with the men on our Board and committees. If you can think of anyone, for heaven's sake jog up my memory. We must by all means keep in the good graces of the unfair sex.

Sculley Bradley to Henry A. Pochmann, 12 January 1938, Modern Language Association, American Literature Group Files, University of Wisconsin Memorial Library Archives, Madison, Wisconsin.

Clare Hemmings

'Telling Feminist Stories'
Feminist Theory

Citation is a central technique in consolidating the trajectory that I am tracing here, and the move is consistently from a relative lack of citation, through to a precise and limited choice of authors. Judith Butler, Donna Haraway and Gayatri Spivak, in particular, are invoked as threshold figures, heralding the dawn of a new feminist era of difference, and representing in themselves the increased sophistication understood to attend that era. Butler, the most cited of all, carries the heaviest teleological burden, frequently single-handedly inaugurating a move away from 'woman' as the invariant ground and subject of oppression, knowledge and resistance. This extract puts the case succinctly: 'Perhaps more than any other feminist theorist, she [Butler] has systematically elaborated a way of understanding gender identity as deeply entrenched but not immutable and has thereby pushed feminist theory beyond the polarities of the essentialist debate' (*Theory, Culture & Society*, 1999). Citation of Haraway tends to occur in accounts charting the move away from essentialist conceptions of the body, and specifically away from a sexually differentiated understanding of the body within feminism. And citation of Spivak seems by turns to mark a black feminist critique of feminism's white presumption, and an account of that difference as postcolonial rather than biological.[18] Their citation thus seems to signal 'the death' of one way of thinking and the inception of a newer, more flexible way of thinking; it never evidences ongoing contests within feminism over precisely these issues. And as the quotation above suggests, this transition is understood to be one that feminism pre-difference is forced or pushed into rather than one that it is already engaged in.

Of particular interest to me here is how attributing such a shift to difference to a few named authors detaches those authors from their own feminist trajectories. If Butler, Haraway and Spivak are 'responsible' for feminism's reluctant acknowledgment of the epistemological problematics of 'woman'; they are grammatically as well as temporally posed as distinct from that history which they have now allowed us to surpass. Citation is once again a key way that a narrative separating poststructuralism from feminism is underwritten. The influences on Butler, Spivak and Haraway are consistently cited as male theorists, affirming the sense of a break in feminist inquiry. For example, in the paper the following extract is taken from, Derrida is the *only* referenced source of inspiration for Haraway's (1985) cyborg figure: 'Haraway must acknowledge a siblingship with Derrida over those central questions of humanism concerning origin, authenticity and universality. The project for both is to dissolve categorical distinctions, which Haraway pursues most particularly by challenging the concept of the natural' (*Body & Society*, 1996).[19]

And despite her engagement with a range of Third World and postcolonial feminist writers, one could be forgiven for thinking that Spivak had only ever read Marx and Derrida from the persistence of such casual introductory phrases such as 'To certify the Derridean assumptions upon which thinkers like Spivak draw …' (*Critical Inquiry*, 1998).[20] Similarly, Foucault, Lacan and Derrida are more consistently seen as Butler's primary influences than Irigaray and Wittig, despite *Gender Trouble's* substantial engagement with these feminist authors. Repeated statements such as 'Judith Butler transformed the study of gender by using Foucault to apply poststructuralist conceptions of the subject to it' (*Australian Feminist Studies*, 2003),[21] and 'because of the influence of Foucault and Derrida, recondite abstractions characterize postmodernist feminist theory in general and Butler's books in particular' (*Critical Inquiry*, 1998), allow Butler to be critically reviewed as marking a break with rather than as having an ongoing engagement with feminist theory.

To recap then: the familiar story is thus. The feminist seventies is ignorant or innocent of racial and sexual diversity at best, or indeed actively exclusionary through its whiteness and heterosexism. The poststructuralist nineties emerges on the other side of the eighties as champion of multiplicity and difference, although significantly an indeterminate rather than located difference – *difference in general*. The teleology could not be more firmly solidified than in the following: 'By the eighties, changes were taking place that laid the groundwork for the third phase of feminist criticism, which I will call the engendering of differences' (*Critical Inquiry*, 1998). The seventies and the nineties loom large in such a statement, despite frequently not being directly mentioned. In order for this teleology to be maintained a number of other binaries are overlaid onto this linear trajectory as I have shown (sexual difference–gender theory, singularity–multiplicity, empiricism–deconstruction, and feminism–poststructuralism), and different perspectives within the feminist seventies' literature squashed, erased, or deemed exceptions to the rule.

Let me be as clear as possible. In order for poststructuralism to emerge both as beyond particularized difference and as inclusive of those differences, this narrative actively requires the misrepresentation of interventions within feminism as decade-specific. A universalized essentialist feminism is directly or indirectly associated with the seventies, and racial and sexual critiques contained in the eighties in order for poststructuralism to have finally both surpassed the essentialisms and incorporated the identities associated with sexual difference, sexuality and race.

[…]

Conclusion

Thus far, I have been mapping some of the ways in which narratives of the recent feminist past, whether seen as successes or failures, fix its teleological

markers in very similar ways. One might simply argue that it is in the nature of all story-telling to generalize, but to return to the genealogical inquiry I began this article with, my concern is with which markers stick over others, and with where our narratives position us as subjects of feminist history and theory. This particular selective story detaches feminism from its own past by generalizing the seventies to the point of absurdity, fixing identity politics as a phase, evacuating poststructuralism of any political purchase, and insisting we bear the burden of these fantasized failings. In the process we disappear class, race and sexuality only to rediscover them 'anew' as embodiment and agency. Small wonder it is not clear what the future of feminist theory holds. In closing, let me ask the following. How might feminist theory generate a proliferation of stories about its recent past that more accurately reflect the diversity of perspectives within (or outside) its orbit? How might we reform the relationship between feminism's constituent parts to allow what are currently phantom presences to take shape? Can we do feminist theory differently?

My starting point, in what will inevitably be a longer set of reflections, concerns the role of the citation of key feminist theorists. As I have argued, in the doubled story of Western feminist theory, Butler, Haraway and Spivak are imaginatively positioned at the threshold of the 'death of feminism' in several ways. They are celebrated for pointing to the failures of an 'early' feminist emphasis on sisterhood, and heralded as marking the long-awaited theoretical sophistication of feminist theory. Yet in this narrative, and in the counter narratives that dispute this celebration, these authors are split from their own legacies within feminism, symbolically, textually and politically situated as 'other' to and 'after' that imagined past. In the counter narratives that position poststructuralism as apolitical and self-referential, these same theorists are understood both as marking the death of politically accountable feminism, and as embodying that death through their own self-referential academic style, frequently denoted in classroom and conference contexts as aggressive inaccessibility. In both versions of the story, it is the specificity of feminist accounts of difference, power and knowledge at all points in the recent past that is elided.

Instead, I would advocate an approach stressing the links rather than the discontinuities between different theoretical frameworks, as a way of challenging the linear 'displacement' of one approach by another. Firstly, schools of thought conventionally pitted against one another, for example sexual difference and gender theories, might productively be read for their rather different approaches to the common problem of power in the production of sexual and gendered meaning. Might there be a methodological rigour to be extrapolated from my perhaps naïve equal enjoyment of Rosi Braidotti and Judith Butler, despite their own insistence on their irreducible difference from one another (Braidotti, 2002; Butler, 2004)? Might it be productive to think through the still harder task of reconnecting Gayatri Spivak with Luce Irigaray, so that the latter's consistent

citation predominantly as object of postcolonial critique becomes more difficult to justify (Spivak, 1987; Irigaray, 1985)?

A closely related second genealogical approach would start from the citational absences in the secondary readings of those feminist theorists overburdened with marking a shift away from feminism. If we insist that, from a feminist perspective, Butler takes her deconstructive cue from Monique Wittig, as she clearly does, the former's role as 'the first' to challenge (1981) 'woman' as the ground of feminist inquiry becomes impossible to sustain. If we rewrite one of the statements introduced earlier – 'Judith Butler transformed the study of gender by using Foucault to apply poststructuralist conceptions of the subject to it' (*Australian Feminist Studies*, 2003) – to 'Judith Butler transformed the study of gender by using Wittig to apply Marxist/lesbian concepts of the subject to it' we see that the shift is more than citational. A valuing of the citational absences used to cement the doubled story I am contesting here repositions both Wittig and Butler, and tells the story of *Gender Trouble* as continuous with its feminist points of reference.[28] What I am suggesting as a feminist alternative to changing the historical record here is a process of revaluing currently sidelined traces of already key rather than marginal feminist figures. In doing so I hope this work might have two primary effects: firstly to highlight the restricted nature of what we already think we know about those figures and their histories; and secondly, to suggest a way of imagining the feminist past somewhat differently – as a series of ongoing contests and relationships rather than a process of imagined linear displacement.

(2005)

Notes

18 As Susan Gubar notes, as 'the most often cited authority on the matter of white feminists' racism … [Spivak] combines an attention toward racial identity politics with … poststructuralist methodologies' (1998: 892). In this sense, Spivak is more of a transitional figure than the other two.

19 *Body & Society* was launched in 1995 to cater for the upsurge of interest in the social and cultural analysis of the human body that has taken place in recent years … *Body & Society* centrally concerns itself with debates in feminism, technology, ecology, postmodernism, medicine, ethics and consumerism which take the body as the central analytic issue in the questioning of established paradigms. (Extract from http://tcs.ntu.ac.uk/body/. Journal published by SAGE)

20 The first thirty years of *Critical Inquiry* witnessed the emergence of structuralism and poststructuralism, cultural studies, feminist theory and identity politics, media and film studies, speech act theory, new historicism, new pragmatism, visual studies and the new art history, new cognitive and psychoanalytic systems, gender studies, new forms of materialist critique,

postcolonial theory, and discourse analysis, queer theory and (more recently) 'returns' to formalism and aesthetics, and to new forms of public and politically committed intellectual work. (Extract from http://www.uchicago.edu/research/jnl-crit-inq/features/specialsymposium.html. Journal published by University of Chicago Press)

21 As an international, peer reviewed journal, *Australian Feminist Studies* publishes academic articles from throughout the world which contribute to current developments in the new and burgeoning fields of Women's Studies and feminist research … We also aim to encourage discussion of interactions between feminist theory and practice; consideration of government and trade union policies that concern women; comment on changes in educational curricula relevant to Women's Studies; sharing of innovative course outlines, reading lists and teaching/learning strategies; reports on local, national and international conferences; reviews, critiques, enthusiasm and correspondence. (Extract from http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/08164649.asp. Journal published by Carfax Publishing)

28 But surely *Gender Trouble* favours Foucault over Wittig? In fact, in direct discussion of their work, Butler devotes 18 pages to Foucault and 17 to Wittig, and the author's critical knife is applied rather equally in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Foucault's 'sentimental indulgence' (Butler, 1990: 96) mirrors Wittig's 'thoroughgoing appropriation' (1990: 128).

Rita Felski

Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodernist Culture

Paraesthetics

How, then, can feminism come to grips with the aesthetic instead of either hoping it will go away or resorting to traditional ideas about the canon? David Carroll has opened up another way of thinking about aesthetics. His term "paraesthetics" is an attempt to explain the importance of literature and art in the work of contemporary philosophers such as Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault. For these thinkers, Carroll suggests, the value of art lies in resisting abstraction, dogmatism, and claims to truth. A line of poetry or a painting demands our attention in a specific way, inviting us to dwell on the particular and the nonidentical, on that which resists systematic thinking and confounds conceptual mastery. Yet poststructuralist thinkers are also at odds with traditional aesthetic theory. They reject any notion of the artwork as an organic, unified whole or of art as an autonomous, self-contained, transcendental sphere.

Here Carroll coins the term paraesthetics, meaning "an aesthetics turned against itself, pushed beyond or beside itself, a faulty, irregular, disordered improper aesthetic."[10] Poststructuralist theory draws on the heritage of aesthetics because it directs our attention to the metaphoric, self-reflexive, and

polysemic aspects of literature and art rather than trying to extract a political message or evaluating a work in terms of its practical value. It is interested in art as a form of resistance to meaning and use. However, while classical aesthetics speaks of the harmony, totality, and integrity of the artwork, paraesthetics prefers the language of contradiction and undecidability. Art is important because it crystallizes and comments self-consciously on a general cultural condition: the end of metaphysics, the lack of foundations, and the slippery and indeterminate nature of language and communication.

Feminist critics influenced by poststructuralism draw on similar ideas to tackle the relations between art and gender. They begin by stressing the importance of language and representation in defining who we are as men or women. Language and culture go all the way down, shaping our most intimate sense of self. It is not that female experience comes to self-knowledge and then strives to express itself in language. Rather, our experiential reality at the most primal and instinctual level is always already soaked in culture. Our sense of what it means to be a woman, of how women look, talk, think, and feel, comes from the books we read, the films we watch, and the invisible ether of everyday assumptions and cultural beliefs in which we are suspended. Rather than subjects producing texts, in other words, texts produce subjects. Thus language and culture play a crucial part in reproducing the unequal relations between women and men. Patriarchal power pervades verbal and visual systems of meaning. Within such systems, woman is always connected to and inseparable from man. Men's ability to symbolize the universal, the absolute, and the transcendental depends on the continuing association of femaleness with difference, otherness, and inferiority.

These arguments lead us to a very different feminist aesthetic, or perhaps more accurately "textual politics." Clearly, we can no longer appeal to female experience as a ground for female creativity. The very idea of a single, common femaleness is a metaphysical illusion produced by a phallocentric culture. The goal of feminist criticism is not to affirm universal woman as counterpart to universal man. This is not only because of the many empirical differences of race, class, sexuality, and age that render notions of shared female experience untenable. It is also because all such visions of woman are contaminated by male-defined notions of the truth of femininity. This is true not only of the negative cultural images of women (prostitute, demon, medusa, bluestocking, vagina dentata) but also of positive ones (woman as nature, woman as nurturing mother, or innocent virgin, or heroic amazon …). Woman is always a metaphor, dense with sedimented meanings.

Rather than expressing the truth of female identity, then, art becomes a means of questioning identity. Art has the power to be uncanny and unsettling, to estrange us from the everyday and challenge our routine assumptions. For example, Jacqueline Rose questions the view of women's writing as a reflection of women's experience and suggests that "writing undermines,

even as it rehearses at its most glaring, the very model of sexual difference itself."[11] Instead of subordinating aesthetic experience to feminist goals, we should recognize the power of literature and art to subvert taken-for-granted truths, including the truths of gender.

This strangeness and uncanniness, according to some critics, can be found in all significant art. Shoshana Felman, for example, suggests that works of literature are great to the extent that "they are self-transgressive with respect to the conscious ideologies that inform them."[12] Here, it is not the gender of the author that dictates how feminist scholars should value art. Rather, it is the formal elements of the work itself, the extent to which these elements come together to question our everyday assumptions about the reality, coherence, and separateness of male and female identity. This feminist approach has obvious parallels to Marxist aesthetics, which has also argued that great art can cast a critical light on the work of ideology.

Marxist critics were often divided on which forms and styles of writing were most radical. Was realism or modernism the most appropriate form for capturing the complex social and psychological realities of modern life? Similar debates have afflicted feminist criticism. Some feminist critics sympathetic to poststructuralist ideas have concluded that an experimental poetics is the best way of unsettling norms of femininity. The appeal of *écriture féminine* and Julia Kristeva's theories of poetic language to many feminist critics in the 1980s stemmed from the belief that subverting syntax, eschewing narrative, and using avant-garde strategies to question reality would help to shatter conventional ideas about gender.

Feminist visual artists also turned to a negative aesthetics of rupture, fragmentation, and disidentification. In her abovementioned *Post-Partum Document*, for example, Mary Kelly explored the experience of motherhood by juxtaposing her child's dirty diapers with psychoanalytic accounts of maternal fantasy and women's fetishistic desire for children in patriarchal culture. Kelly's work flatly refuses to offer the viewer an iconic representation of motherhood and to gratify feminist desires for positive images of women. How, after all, could any image of the maternal ever transcend the suffocating weight of the endless madonnas and pietàs that have over the centuries rendered women such easily consumable objects of the male gaze?[13]

The "paraesthetic" turn within feminist theory thus leads to a more serious and substantial engagement with the aesthetic as both a negative and a positive phenomenon. Negative because male-defined images, metaphors, and narratives are powerful and all-pervasive. We cannot simply cast off these false representations to uncover an unblemished and authentic female reality. Any attempt by women to depict women's perspective is enmeshed within rhetoric, narrative, and figure, shaped by the symbols and conventions of a phallocentric culture. Feminism cannot, in this sense, exist outside the male-defined heritage of aesthetic representation.

But the aesthetic also acquires a positive value. Given the importance of language and culture in shaping reality, questioning representation can become a powerful means of questioning the social world. In the twentieth century, art has often been another name for this questioning. Much modern art has sought to estrange us from everyday reality, to shatter the fiction of a unified, stable ego and to explore the opaque, enigmatic qualities of language. Art is not just a means to truth, but also a way of questioning the desire for truth. There are thus obvious affinities between avant-garde art and a feminist poststructuralism that seeks to undermine phallocentric norms. Ingrid Richardson writes, "feminism has embraced the aesthetic as that one final realm which has not been and cannot be subsumed into reason, as that place which sidesteps-undercuts preoccupations with identity, boundaries and norms, as the space where female desire can finally be written into discourse and spill out new matrices of subjectivity and experience."[14]

Aesthetics, in other words, can be a space of resistance as well as conformism. Feminist attacks on art as a bastion of male authority and linchpin of the status quo are too simple and reductive. Within modernity, at least, the role of the artist has often been that of dissident and outsider. Aesthetic experience has a complicated and often conflict-ridden relationship to a social order whose primary values are those of efficiency, rationality, and profit. This is not to suggest that male artists have always been friends and allies of feminism. If anything, the opposite has been true. But modern art does contain a rich and complex history of experimenting with differing styles and techniques of representation, with questioning everyday realities and imagining alternative worlds. As feminist critics and artists struggle to rethink the meaning of gender, they have found aspects of that history inspiring.

From the standpoint of paraesthetics, then, gender and the aesthetic are intertwined in a manner quite unlike conventional feminist aesthetics. Art is not subordinated to a feminist demand for a fixed and coherent female identity. Rather, art is the place where identity fails, where the fictions of separate, unitary and complementary male and female selves are revealed as fictions. This art is "feminine" in a metaphorical sense, in embracing everything that is elided and repressed by the binary logic of a patriarchal culture. Femininity is thus the space of non-identity rather than identity, heterogeneity and otherness rather than the will to truth. In this sense, there would appear to be no necessary relationship between the (female) gender of the author and the (feminine) gender of art. Some feminist critics, however, have insisted that the two are linked, and that the fragmented, chaotic, polysemic forms of experimental art have a close affinity with women's bodies and women's psyches. Feminine sexuality engenders feminine textuality.

This perspective in turn raises new questions about social meanings and effects of art. How revolutionary, after all, is poetic language? Does the

shattering of form reach out beyond the aesthetic sphere? Art may offer new ways of seeing, but do these new ways translate into social change? Should they? Who are the audiences of experimental and avant-garde art and how does this fact affect claims about the subversive nature of feminine writing or antirepresentational art? Feminist critics sometime use the language of transgression too glibly, without thinking about the specific contexts in which literature and art are interpreted. Art may no longer offer positive truth, but it can easily slide into a form of negative truth or negative theology, whose subversive effects are assumed rather than demonstrated.

(2000)

Notes

10 David Carroll, *Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida* (New York: Methuen, 1987), xiv.
11 Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986), 121.
12 Shoshana Felman, *Reading and Sexual Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 6.
13 For an overview of *écriture féminine* and the work of Julia Kristeva, see Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London: Methuen, 1985). Griselda Pollock discusses an aesthetics of disidentification in "Screening the Seventies: Sexuality and Representation in Feminist Practice – A Brechtian Perspective," in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988).
14 Ingrid Richardson, "Feminism and Critical Theory," unpublished manuscript.

Linda R. Williams

'Happy Families? Feminist Reproduction and Matrilineal Thought'
New Feminist Discourses

Feminist Family Romances

Mother/daughterhood is then one of the most persistent ways that feminism has articulated women's alternative networks of communication. As metaphor it has profoundly affected our reading of women's literary history, and I want to explore more closely what is at stake in this. It is, I think, not so simple. However strongly this 'pure' bond is asserted, however much it is seen to be a democratic exchange of feeling and information, its intervention as a controlling metaphor in feminist studies, and particularly in feminist criticism, needs to be challenged. From the premiss that women have access to purity of sublime or semiotic communication comes the notion that authentic female communication takes place through matriarchal and matrilineal networks, networks which are purified from

the distortions of the symbolic. Hegel's women conceive immaculately because for them no defiling or politicized process of transmission takes place in thought. They 'gather' knowledge in an apparently unmediated way – it is 'exchanged' or absorbed, and therefore not subject to the problems of transmission.

Against this, and with Alice Jardine, I would

> like to avoid the mother/daughter paradigm here (so as not to succumb simply to miming the traditional father/son, master/disciple model), but it is difficult to avoid at this point being positioned by the institution as mothers and daughters. Structures of debt/gift (mothers and increasingly daughters control a lot of money and prestige in the university), structures of our new institutional power over each other, desires and demands for recognition and love – all of these are falling into place in rather familiar ways.[18]

Her 'Notes for an Analysis' is written in anticipation of a 'new kind of feminist intellectual' who 'fully inscribes herself within the ethics of impossibility, concluding by calling for the wiping away of 'the concept of "generation" altogether' when feminist women place themselves 'across the generations'. She suggests an embrace of intra-generational solidarity which would erase the power of differentials bound up in the relationship of debt between mothers and daughters, towards a totality of unified radical feminist intellectuals. It is a pity that such a complex analysis of the contemporaneity of feminism and psychoanalysis ends before suggesting how this embrace of generational forgetting is to take place, and at what point it would resist undifferentiated unity with a dynamic of different, *afamilial* powers.

How, then, can feminism interpret the transmission of ideas, knowledge; systems of thought outside of an Oedipal dynamic? With what language do we currently discuss the channels through which information is passed on? When Hegel writes the offhand 'Women are educated – who knows how?' he invites us to presume that the way in which men are educated is no problem at all. That's obvious – it's women who are the mystery. I want to ask a series of questions about how we pass on information to each other and what we want it to do. What is feminist transmission? Why do we so often employ familial metaphors to interpret our conceptual and scholarly relationships with each other? What are the power relations at stake in setting up feminist networks of thinking which rely on mother-daughter or sisterly ties? Why are we so reluctant to rid ourselves of the family? These questions focus not only on the problem of mother–daughter relations in history or psychoanalysis, but crucially on the way we have interpreted women's *literary* history as a *family* history, glued together by those 'unknowable' feminine relations discussed above: 'the unique bonds that link women in what we might call the secret sisterhood of their literary subculture'.[19] Thus it seems, ironically, that the very force which some writers have drawn upon to signal the breakdown of patriarchal family relations – a feminine

communication which disrupts normal epistemologies – has then been used to make coherent an alternative Great (female) Tradition.

Virginia Woolf's famous statement, 'we think back through our mothers if we are women'[20] has engendered a whole family of feminisms dedicated to the recovery of an intellectual matriarchy. As Rachel Bowlby writes, 'Woolf has herself become foremother to a generation of feminists who "think back through our mothers".'[21] What Bowlby is indicating, then, isn't just that Woolf thought that there is a literary history which works matrilineally, but that this has in turn engendered a feminist critical family line. Matriarchal thinking has become a primary feminist characteristic, and its language acts as the freemason's handshake of Gilbert and Gubar's 'secret sisterhood'. I want briefly to outline here the arguments of a few kinswomen who display the family resemblances most strongly. Is it a happy family? I think not. Its members squabble constantly over who mother is. Is she Dale Spender's mother, stable source of a comfortable literary tradition, legitimized and authentic? Is she the sublime, pre-Oedipal mother, with whom closeness opens up revolutionary possibilities of disruption?

Dale Spender's *Mothers of the Novel* – dedicated to the author's mother, presumably the grandmother of this text – is an unashamedly evangelical eulogy to 'our' literary matriarchs. Her project is to reclaim the 'treasure chest'[22] of 'women's traditions' which 'we have been missing'.[23] Indeed, her fervent championing of a tradition mothered and reproduced by women – 'it is my contention that women were the mothers of the novel and that any other version of its origin is but a myth of male creation' – is uncannily like that of F. R. Leavis who, in his early work, also occupied an inspired dissident position, championing the canonically repressed. And, like Leavis, what Spender wants to do is to produce an 'authentic' or 'legitimated female tradition',[24] thus exemplifying a feminist critical position which turns to the fecund mother figure as guarantor of a sense of stability and genealogical truth.

Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* is perhaps a more interesting example of matriarchal reading. They take the problem of how creativity is engendered head-on, and partly inherit Harold Bloom's interpretation of literary movement as energized by the anxiety of influence. 'Criticism', for Bloom, 'is the art of knowing the hidden roads that go from poem to poem'[25] – it is the detection of the literary violation of fathers by sons. Writing that 'Poetry (Romance) is Family Romance',[26] Bloom rewrites literary history as the history of Oedipal conflict.

> True poetic history is the story of how poets as poets have suffered other poets, just as any true biography is the story of how anyone suffered his own family – or his own displacement of family into lovers and friends.

Summary – Every poem is a misinterpretation of a parent poem.[27]

For Bloom, imagination is *mis*interpretation; creativity is the deliberate violation of what's come before. A feminism which would assemble all the fragments of women's literary history into 'the career of a single woman artist, a "mother of us all" ',[28] which would conform in part to the notion that female imagination is osmotically communicated through that 'unique bond', would undoubtedly have enormous problems with such a violating tradition. What Gilbert and Gubar want to do is take Bloom's model and strip it of its anxiety as far as literary daughters and mothers are concerned, neatly retaining father as the bad relation. Patriarchal tradition takes on the image of the wicked stepfather in a romance of positive feminine relations: the father remains the one to be killed, and although today's women writers are 'the daughters of too few mothers', nevertheless a dedicated enough act of feminist critical genealogy can trace a whole matriarchal history, putting together the history of 'a woman whom patriarchal poetics dismembered and whom we have tried to remember'. Re-membering thus becomes a process dedicated to unity; fragments of written selves are made to undergo a rite of matrilineal coherence. Remembering phallically assembles fragments into a unity of 'membership'. If patriarchal history was the process of splitting women exogamically from each other, disseminating their powers and dismembering their tradition, certain feminist histories would bring the parts back into the organic whole again. Coherence, progress, growth, community, all combine to produce a stable tradition of women's literary history. The female artist can then begin the struggle which Gilbert and Gubar call 'the anxiety of authorship', 'only by actively seeking a female precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against partriarchal literary authority is possible'.[29]

Furthermore, not only has the reintroduction of a sense of tradition restabilized our understanding of women's writing but ironically enough the very fact that women have been able to draw upon matrilineal metaphors has given that tradition the weight of genetic verification. To assert that paternity is undecidable whilst maternity is undeniable is a fairly commonplace idea; as Freud writes in *Moses and Monotheism*,

> this turning from the mother to the father points in addition to a victory of intellectuality over sensuality – that is, an advance in civilization, since maternity is proved by the evidence of the senses while paternity is a hypothesis, based on an inference and a premiss.[30]

Hélène Cixous, champion of fiction if ever there was one, is, however, quite prepared to denigrate it in contrast with this primary 'fact' of maternity: 'Paternity, which is a fiction, is fiction passing itself off as truth.'[31] To extend this into the metaphorics of writing generations, feminist literary history has reversed and rewritten Cixous' statement as: 'literary maternity, which

is a fact, is fact which has historically been passed off as untruth'. Some feminist criticisms have challenged this 'historical passing off' in order to establish a framework within which feminist scholarship is meaningful. Thus in pursuit of matrilineal stability, feminism has been able to deploy the metaphor of the most concrete human given of all: the fact that one is the issue of one's mother. So, patriarchal literary tradition has acted only to render women writers temporary orphans; the happy ending of the family romance is that given sufficiently skilful sleuthing, the truth will out and our true mother will be found.

(1992)

Notes

18 Alice Jardine, 'Notes for an Analysis', in Teresa Brennan (ed.), *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (London, 1989), p. 77.
19 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven and London, 1979), p. 51.
20 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) (St Albans, 1977), pp. 72–3.
21 Rachel Bowlby, *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations* (Oxford, 1988), p. 25.
22 Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Women Writers Before Jane Austen* (London, 1986), p. 2.
23 ibid., p. 6.
24 ibid., pp. 262–3.
25 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford, 1973), p. 96.
26 ibid., p. 95.
27 Bloom, op. cit.
28 Gilbert and Gubar, op. cit., p. 101.
29 ibid., p. 49.
30 Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939 [1934–8]), in Pelican Freud Library vol. 13, *The Origins of Religion*, p. 361.
31 Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* (1975), trans. Betsy Wing (Manchester, 1986), p. 101.

Jane Spencer

Literary Relations: Kinship and the Canon 1660–1830

Nevertheless, I find kinship relations and kinship metaphors crucial both to the literary lives of writers from the Restoration to the Romantics, and to the creation of the canon. First, while the long-term account of the separation of kinship and economy is justified, the extent to which kinship was in decline in the period under discussion can easily be exaggerated. Capitalist organization

did not necessarily mean that the family group lost its economic role. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, in a classic study, showed how important family businesses were to the expanding economy of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and Richard Grassby's large empirical study of London business families in an earlier period concludes that the business world, organized around kinship relations, can be described as a world of 'familial capitalism'.[9] These historians offer helpful ways of thinking about writers working together in the eighteenth century. People did not only compete in the literary market as isolated individuals. For the married couple Richard and Elizabeth Griffith, who published their premarital correspondence as *Letters of Henry and Frances*, or sisters Harriet and Sophia Lee, who ran a school together and collaborated on a volume of fictional tales, or the several generations of Sheridans who worked in various literary genres, writing was a kind of family enterprise. How a family setting for literary life nurtured and constrained writers, and how it affected their sense of themselves as authors and the ways they were received (or not) into the developing canon, will be a part of my focus in the following chapters.

Secondly, even when there are significant changes in economic and social organization, older ways of cultural understanding retain a great deal of their power, and show themselves in commonly used metaphors. Kinship metaphors are a particularly strong example of this, for while kinship has lost ground as a structuring principle for trade and industry, and individuals today are less likely than those of 300 years ago to centre their lives in their families of origin, the psychological importance of primary kinship relations remains. The importance of the idea of paternal generation and authority is evident in the common habit of referring to inventors as fathers of their inventions, artists and writers as fathers of movements and traditions, or scientists as fathers of different specialisms.[10] Kinship metaphors can even be understood as a fundamental kind of metaphor, because we understand all kinds of resemblance 'in terms of kin relation and family resemblance', ideas which therefore underlie our patterns of language and cognition.[11] This is not to say, though, that the ideas that necessity is the mother of invention and J. Robert Oppenheimer was the father of the atomic bomb express universal truths. Current anthropological thought is moving away from the view that kinship is transhistorically, cross-culturally central to all societies. Rather, it is the huge importance of kinship within Western views of the world that has led Western anthropologists to impose it as a pattern for understanding societies which understand themselves in quite different terms.[12] The centrality of the concepts of generative literary fatherhood, mythical literary motherhood, and competitive and co-operative literary brotherhood and sisterhood, to the creation of the British literary tradition should be seen as part of a culturally and historically specific (though widespread and long lasting) complex of ideas about kinship relations.

(2005)

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9 Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780–1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987); Richard Grassby, *Kinship and Capitalism: Marriage, Family, and Business in the English-Speaking World, 1580–1740* (Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and CUP, 2001).

10 Robert K. Merton lists the fathers of pathology, palaeontology, electrotechnics, mathematical physics, histology, protozoology and bacteriology, preventive medicine, modern acoustics, scientific pedagogy, experimental psychology, biometry, 'and, of course, Comte, the Father of Sociology': his names, he points out, are selected from a much longer list of generally acknowledged fathers. See 'Priorities in Scientific Discovery: A Chapter in the Sociology of Science', in Bernard Barber and Walter Hirsch (eds.), *The Sociology of Science* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1962), 447–85. For a discussion of the sinister implications of the modern competition for scientific paternity see Brian Easlea, *Fathering the Unthinkable: Masculinity, Scientists and the Nuclear Arms Race* (London: Pluto Press, 1983).

11 Mark Turner, *Death is the Mother of Beauty: Mind, Metaphor, Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 11. Turner classifies a number of 'basic' metaphors dependent on parenthood and siblinghood, and notes the gender prejudices implicit in them, e.g. in metaphors in which 'a female state generates a male activity' (ibid. 56). For the cognitive linguistic view of metaphor, which sees metaphors not as arbitrary rhetorical devices but as rooted in sensorimotor experiences, see Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Reason and Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), and Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 2002).

12 The challenge to the anthropological consensus on kinship is found in David Schneider, *A Critique of the Study of Kinship* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984). For a discussion of current trends in kinship studies see Ladislav Hóly, *Anthropological Perspectives on Kinship* (London: Pluto Press, 1996).

Nancy K. Miller

'Parables and Politics: Feminist Criticism in 1986'
Paragraph

Throughout his overview of feminist literary studies, Ruthven complains about and protests against what he calls 'separatist feminism' (13); what he understands to be an exclusive/exclusionist attention to women's writing: 'It would be a pity', he worries, by way of a conclusion:

> if the feminist critique, which has been so successful in identifying androcentric bias against women writers and in making possible a critical discourse free of such

> prejudices, should be betrayed by a gynocritics developed along separatist lines. For that would simply reproduce the polarity between women's writing and men's which feminist criticism set out to combat in the first place. And it would also make it that much harder next time to persuade men and women that they have far too much to learn from one another to risk going their separate ways. (128)

Since I myself have been dubbed a 'partisan of separatist criticism',[7] I would like in closing to suggest a more accurate and useful way to think about women's writing. I would argue that it is precisely through the processes of recovery, revision and 'revisionary rereading' (Kolodny) which constitute the characteristic gestures of the work on women's writing, that we can learn how to challenge the false continuities ('origins' and influences) of the canon: a collection of texts that might more truthfully be designated as 'men's writing'.[8]

In many ways the reconstruction of feminism, like deconstruction which involves two principles or steps, is a doubled dealing: 'a *reversal* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system'.[9] But the reconstruction sought by feminist literary theory necessarily operates a specific inflection (and displacement) of that set of gestures: the establishment of a female tradition – a move that by its own claims to representation seeks to unsettle the claims of literary history – *and* a steady, Medusa-like gaze from its own genealogies at a tradition that has never thought to think back through its mothers. Put another way, my argument here is that a feminist look at the canon (the system) will reveal the petrification of the gender hierarchies that regulate the institutionalization of literature; and displace the asymmetries those hierarchies install. Contrary to what Ruthven imagines, then, I would argue that by its attention to the questions of feminist literary theory – who reads, who writes, whose interests are served by this reading and writing? – the study of women's writing *returns* separatism from the margins to the nervous 'I' of the dominant beholders. And in my view, meaningful change within the institution will come only from this return to sender that dislocates the universal subject from his place at the centre of the dominant discourse.

The third parable. In the literature of female signature there is a text, a long novel, though that term domesticates the work's explosion of generic restraints (or rather a kind of Bakhtinian heteroglossia reigns instead), that takes up the question of the pantheon, the canon and the place in it for the woman writer. This work is Germaine de Stael's *Corinne or Italy* (1807). Corinne, the heroine, begins the tour of Rome she has designed to capture the imagination of Oswald, the melancholy Englishman who has come to Italy to recover his health, and recover from the grief brought on by the death of his Father.

Corinne, a poet and improviser whose crowning on the steps of the Capitol dramatically introduces the lovers to each other, takes Oswald first to the Pantheon where one can see 'the busts of the most famous artists: they

decorate the niches where the gods of the ancients had been placed' (96). Corinne explains that her deepest desire is to have her place there as well: 'I've already chosen mine, she said, showing him an empty niche' (97).

If we ask again, 'how does the inclusion of women's writing alter our view of the tradition', *Corinne* offers an exemplary set of answers: it rereads the Greek myth through Roman architecture; it incarnates cultural relativism; it articulates the history of Classicism and Romanticism; it politicizes, by making it a question of public display, the notion of genius (Moers); it stages the problem of subjectivity; and dramatizes the question of the artist's relation to the social. The novel had enormous impact on (women) writers in France, England and America. Need I say that it belongs neither to the canon of French literature – though because of Staël's status as an intellectual the novel gets honourable mention – nor to the pantheon of world literature. In other words, the niche still remains empty.

When Corinne realizes she is about to die (young), and is too ill to perform, she has her verses read, in a final theatrical, by a young girl. She also arranges before her death to have her tiny niece, Juliette (the daughter of Oswald and Corinne's English half-sister), learn to speak Italian and play the harp: just like Corinne, but of course with the difference a generation makes. Thus the artist in her lifetime arranges for and underwrites her legacy: what I will call a feminist 'aftertext' (Berg, 219).

Barthes, we know, has argued that the Death of the Author is co-terminous with, if not brought about by, the Birth of the Reader. Although he records the former event with a jubilation feminist critics will not all necessarily share, there is, perhaps, good reason to appropriate and revise the paradigm. For this is our only hope. Confronted with the persistence of the empty niche, it becomes our task to stage the possibility of a different sort of continuity. Not the biological and murderous simplicity that appeals so much to the father and son teams of our cultural paradigms (à la Harold Bloom after Sigmund Freud), but a more complex legacy that like Corinne's passes on its values in life to another generation through reading and its performatives (Berg, 214); and like Lucy Snowe's authorizes its passions from another and finally ambiguous scene of writing.

(1986)

Notes

7 Adrienne Munich, 'Notorious signs, feminist criticism and literary tradition', in *Making a Difference*. In *Reading Woman* Mary Jacobus performs an astute analysis of Ruthven's obsession with separatism: Ruthven's 'own discourse on feminist criticism retains its imaginary mastery of the discourse of feminism. The measure is separation (feminist criticism as castration) or a reassuring image of wholeness (feminist criticism as the imaginary, narcissistic completion of critical

lack): the phallic woman, in short, has something to offer the institution of criticism after all.'

8 There is a proposal on the floor at Dartmouth College, put forward by a man, that the catalogue should accurately designate what is taught. What flows from this is that 'Modern British and American Poetry', for example, would read, 'White European Male Modern British and American Poetry'; and the great works would read: men's writing. In the recorded discussion about the establishment at Barnard College of a Women's Studies Programme and major in 1977, the Professor of Music 'stated that he found it difficult to envision a men's studies programme and therefore found it equally difficult to conceive of a women's studies programme'.

9 The argument continues: 'It is on that condition alone that deconstruction will provide the means of *intervening* in the field of oppositions it criticizes and which is also a field of non-discursive forces' (*Marges*, 392; in Culler, 86). Whether the operations of displacement actually effect an intervention in the scene of non-discursive structures, in the hierarchies of university life, for example, is to my mind the great question of deconstructive criticism as a politics.

Viviane Forrester

'What Women's Eyes See'
New French Feminisms

We don't know what women's vision is. What do women's eyes see? How do they carve, invent, decipher the world? I don't know. I know my own vision, the vision of one woman, but the world seen through the eyes of others? I only know what men's eyes see.

So what do men's eyes see? A crippled world, mutilated, deprived of women's vision. In fact men share our malaise, suffer from the same tragedy: the absence of women particularly in the field of cinema.

If we were responsible for this absence, couldn't they complain about it? 'After all,' they would say, 'we have communicated our images, our vision to you; you are withholding yours. That is why we present a castrated universe, a life whose essential answers are unknown to us. We make films, we attempt to say, to translate, to destroy, to know, to invent, and you condemn us to a monologue that confines us to stale repetition, an isolation such that we are becoming petrified in endless narcissism. We have only fathers. We see only through our own fantasms, our malaise, the tricks we play on you, our renunciations (this network of conventions which replaces you and propagates itself dangerously at every level of our work) and the vacuum created by your absence and the dolls who fill it and whom we have fabricated. And we do not know how you see us. You do not look at us, etc.'

We don't hear such complaints and for obvious reasons. Because this blindness to women's vision, which in fact prohibits any global vision of the world, any vision of the human species, has been fashioned by men for our mutual impoverishment.

How can male directors today not beg women to pick up the camera, to open up unknown areas to them, to liberate them from their redundant vision which is deeply deformed by this lack? Women's vision is what is lacking and this lack not only creates a vacuum but it perverts, alters, annuls every statement. Women's vision is what you don't see; it is withdrawn, concealed. The images, the pictures, the frames, the movements, the rhythms, the abrupt new shots of which we have been deprived, these are the prisoners of women's vision, of a confined vision.

The quality of this vision is not the point – in the hierarchical sense – it is not better (how absurd to speak of a 'better' vision), it is not more efficient, more immediate (certain women will assert that it is, but that's *not* the point); but it is lacking. And this deficiency is suicidal.

Women are going to seize (they are beginning to do so) what they should have acquired naturally at the same time as men did, what men after this bad start should have eventually begged women to undertake: the practice of film making. Women will have to defend themselves against an accumulation of clichés, of sacred routines which men delight in or reject and which will frequently trap women as well. They will need a great deal of concentration and above all of precision. They will have to see, to look, to look at themselves unaffectedly, with a natural gaze that is so difficult to maintain; they will have to dare to see not only their own fantasms, but also, instead of an old catalogue, fresh, new images of a weary world. Why will they be more apt to rid themselves of whatever obstructs men's vision? Because women are the secret to be discovered, they are the fissures. They are the source where no one has been.

(1976)

Translated by Isabelle de Courtivron

Shoshana Felman

'Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy'
Diacritics

A question could be raised: if 'the woman' is precisely the Other of any conceivable Western theoretical locus of speech, how can the woman as such be speaking in this book? Who is speaking here, and who is asserting the otherness of the woman? If, as Luce Irigaray suggests, the woman's silence, or the repression of her capacity to speak, are constitutive of philosophy and of theoretical discourse

as such, from what theoretical locus is Luce Irigaray herself speaking in order to develop her own theoretical discourse about the woman's exclusion? Is she speaking the language of men, or the silence of women? Is she speaking *as* a woman, or *in place of* the (silent) woman, *for* the woman, *in the name of* the woman? Is it enough to *be* a woman in order to *speak* as a woman? Is 'speaking as a woman' a fact determined by some biological *condition* or by a strategic, theoretical *position*, by anatomy[1] or by culture? What if 'speaking as a woman' were not a simple 'natural' fact, could not be taken for granted? With the increasing number of women and men alike who are currently choosing to share in the rising fortune of female misfortune, it has become all too easy to be a speaker '*for* women.' But what does 'speaking *for* women' imply? What is 'to speak *in the name of* the woman'? What, in a general manner, does 'speech in the name of mean? Is it not a precise repetition of the oppressive gesture of *representation*, by means of which, throughout the history of logos, man has reduced the woman to the status of a silent and subordinate object, to something inherently *spoken for?* To 'speak in the name of,' to 'speak *for*,' could thus mean, once again, to appropriate and to silence. This important theoretical question about the status of its own discourse and its own 'representation' of women, with which any feminist thought has to cope, is not thought out by Luce Irigaray, and thus remains the blind spot of her critical undertaking.

(1975)

Note

1 Freud has thus pronounced his famous verdict on women: 'Anatomy is destiny,' But this is precisely the focus of the feminist contestation.

Margaret J. M. Ezell

Writing Women's Literary History

Those who have ventured where Greer warns us not to tread, writing women's literary history, do encounter the problem of scarcity of texts and critical studies which Greer cites. To solve this problem and to establish common ground over a historical line, diachronically, the solution has been to investigate using a linear cause and effect analysis, either to start in the past and work forward in time, looking for development and searching for patterns of influence, or to read backward, starting with the present and looking for predecessors, a sort of literary genealogy. Because, until recent years, it was extremely difficult to obtain materials by and about women writers before 1800 (the causes of which are analyzed in chapters 3 and 4), the tendency has been to read backward. The starting point for establishing commonality and for generalizing about women's writing and women's lives as authors has been either from the

present or from the nineteenth century, defined by Moers as the "epic age" of women writers. Because of this choice, as we shall see, recent critical assumptions about earlier women's writings and about patterns of female authorship have tended to be based on nineteenth- and twentieth-century examples.

In its search for a commonality through which to create a female literary tradition, women's literary history has scanned the biographies of early women writers. We seek to relate to the past through shared life experiences or shared responses. As Alice Walker phrased it, we search for our mothers' gardens: in describing the composition of "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff," Walker observed:

> In that story I gathered up the historical and psychological threads of the life my ancestors lived, and in the writing of it I felt joy and strength and my own continuity. I had that wonderful feeling writers get sometimes, not very often, of being *with* a great many people, ancient spirits, all very happy to see me consulting and acknowledging them, and eager to let me know, through the joy of their presence, that, indeed, I am not alone.[7]

This metaphor of the female literary family is frequently found in studies of women's literary history. Moers's landmark study of nineteenth-century women writers makes use of this image of the literary community as a family of women to emphasize its stabilizing effect on the female author, the confidence given by the possession of predecessors. While modern women writers have more educational opportunities than their restricted Victorian ancestors, Moers argues, they, too, "appear to benefit still from their membership in the wide-spreading family of women writers."[8]

Ultimately, one can see the attempt to write women's literary history as having the same goal as the original one of genealogy. One very great need expressed in this search for the tradition is to provide literary ancestors; ancestors document the legitimacy of current women's literary activities. The re-creation of a female family of authorship also suggests that it will provide the emotional security and support lacking in society at large.

The danger in searching out one's relatives, however, is whom one might find. For ideological reasons this search is an important step in reclaiming significance for women's history, which then helps to enable future study. But are we actually seeing all that there is to see in the past, meeting all our relatives, in our genealogical sweeps? Or are we so concerned with establishing continuity that our vision of the life of a woman writer, before 1700 in particular, is exclusive and selective? Have we, to use Jerome McGann's terms, gerrymandered the past in order to support a particular present concept of the woman writer?

[…]

A feminist/new historicist approach to this particular construction of the past raises several issues. Given the heavy dependence on nineteenth-century

women's literature in the construction of a theory of female authorship, one must question the extent to which the image of the woman writer in earlier periods has been made to conform to a Romantic or Victorian concept of the artist. One must also wonder about the extent to which the analysis of pre-1700 literature in critical studies is based on a nineteenth-century model of literature as a commercial activity.

Thus, I find myself agreeing with Todd, whose own work focuses on the eighteenth century, that one of the central problems in existing women's literary history is the critics' lack of familiarity with early texts, that "we avoid listening to a past that might be annoying through its resolute refusal to anticipate us" (p. 46). However, I do not believe her assertion that this lack of familiarity is a characteristic of "the early phase of feminist criticism in general," a phase now supposedly superseded. I believe it arises in part from the insistence on women's literary history following a nineteenth-century model of narrative historiography. Narrative history is a linear mode of organization, which, in its ordering of events, concentrates on locating events on a time line to discover cause and effect solutions, on defining separate periods to serve as the bases for comparison and ranking, on finding "origins" and significant turning points in an evolutionary pattern that leads up to and explains the contemporary situation.

For example, the assumptions about the evolutionary nature of the technology of authorship permeate the very questions we bring to texts written before 1700. As we shall see, even studies on seventeenth-century women writers, such as Jacqueline Pearson's analysis of women dramatists in the Restoration and Goreau's reading of Aphra Behn and Lady Falkland, tend to adopt a nineteenth-century construction of the practice of authorship and the nature of literature as being the norm against which earlier practices are ranked. As I suggested in the Introduction, while the last decade has seen a rise in the number of studies of women writing before 1700, it has not yet seen a systematic challenge to the original conceptualization of an evolutionary pattern of female authorship proposed by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own,* which has been elaborated by Showalter, Moers, Gilbert, and Gubar into a theory of female creativity.

Instead, accounts of early women's writing have tended to push back the dates on the time line without questioning the system behind it. This adherence to a linear narrative of women's literary history has directed the type of questions we ask about early women writers. Thus we now debate whether Mary Astell or Jane Anger was the "first" English feminist, a debate that can only be decided by ranking the earlier woman's "feminism" against the latter's; likewise, Mary Sidney now contests with Aphra Behn for the title of "the first woman in the period who sought a clear literary vocation" without a question being raised concerning the point of this competition. Being "first," of course, establishes the model

against which others are measured, but it also indicates a more rudimentary accomplishment – being the first is not usually equated with being the best.

And the current theoretical model of women's literary history is very much concerned with who wins, who is better than another. Not only does Showalter's model of the evolution of women's texts from the feminine, to the feminist, to the female rank the different periods in ascending order through chronological history, but studies devoted to Renaissance and Restoration periods adopt the same narrative strategy as well. When we study women writing in the Renaissance as a group, the ultimate question posed is, "is there evidence of evolution, both for the individual and for the group? Unsurprisingly, they write better the more they write; surprisingly in so small a group, each poet surpasses her predecessor"; we are offered an immediate cause and effect explanation in the scheme of the linear progress of women writing in the Renaissance: "Time would allow women to evolve poetically because once there was one published woman poet, other women would not only start practicing, they would realize that women could be poets without sacrificing their character."[10]

The problem with this type of linear historiography that focuses on unique events – whether it is involved in identifying the first feminist, or the first woman with a "true" literary vocation, or a more general event such as middle-class women beginning to write commercially, which Woolf cites as the turning point in women's history – is that it has an unstated notion of evolutionary progress built into it. Events are interpreted as they lead up to or follow a major event. As a result, this history can easily negate those events preceding the chosen significant one on the time line; for example, women who do not fit the pattern of development signposted by the special events get labeled "anomalies" or are defined as doing something different and less important (writing "closet" literature), or, as we shall see in the case of the late seventeenth-century Quaker women writers, they are simply left out.

(1993)

Notes

7 Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 13.

8 Ellen Moers, *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 44.

10 Elaine V. Beilin, *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987), 116–17.

Betty A. Schellenberg

The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain

My inquiry took root in graduate student days in the late 1980s, when my discovery of eighteenth-century studies coincided with a reinvigoration of the field through exciting new historicist, materialist, print culture, and above all, feminist approaches. The novelty of the attention paid to noncanonical women writers in such overviews of the period as Jane Spencer's *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (1986), Kathryn Shevelow's *Women and Print Culture: The Construction of Femininity in the Early Periodical* (1989), and Janet Todd's *The Sign of Angellica* (1989) was captured by Patricia Meyer Spacks, who in 1990 reviewed *The Sign of Angellica* as responding to "a great recent shift in literary assumptions" with what "only a few years [before], would have seemed inconceivable to write, or to read, a literary history of the Restoration and eighteenth century focused entirely on women."[4]

The influence of these studies was equally felt in the form of an interpretive frame they had adopted – the model of a separate-spheres gender economy, established with the rise of a bourgeois class in the eighteenth century, which relegated women to the private (domestic) sphere, and to rigid codes of sexual chastity, propriety, and silence.[5] From this starting point, women writers' interventions in the public realm of print were by definition transgressive. As Shevelow put it, women writers were permitted to enter the public sphere of letters only to reinforce the figure of "the domestic woman, constructed in a relation of difference to men, a difference of kind rather than degree." Forays into print had therefore to present a legitimizing face to the public, whether that of an authorizing male literary figure or that of the author herself in an apologetic preamble about "domestic distress, financial necessity, and the urge to instruct other women."[6] The actual matter of such publications, it followed, would either be genuinely orthodox, and in that case produced by the appropriated voice of a submissive woman, or itself in masquerade, its subversion peeping slyly out from beneath a surface orthodoxy, in the case of a writer of genuine feminist convictions. Thus this account of eighteenth-century women writers, using gender as fundamental binary cause, produced layers of oppositional and inevitably value-laden categories of masculine and feminine, cultural gatekeeper and supplicant, surface and depth, orthodox and subversive, appropriated and feminist.

I must emphasize that in Spencer, Shevelow, and Todd the model I have just described is more nuanced than its influence on subsequent literary criticism would suggest.[7] Nevertheless, the interpretive frame had a tendency to

become increasingly schematic with each application, especially in the area that concerns me here, the height of the eighteenth century. For the binary synchronic structure of this model was given narrative momentum by a diachronic explanation of the long eighteenth century which might be called, if somewhat disrespectfully, the "sandwich model." Restoration and early eighteenth-century writers such as Aphra Behn and Delarivier Manley engaged in a brief flowering of feminism characterized by what Todd described as "sophisticated insights and techniques," displayed in productions which were "erotic and worldly." A century later, fiction "seem[ed] to gain a new strength from an assumption of the moralist's authority" with Frances Burney, Ann Radcliffe, and Mary Wollstonecraft. Between these endpoints, writers such as Frances Brooke, along with Sarah Fielding, Frances Sheridan, and Sarah Scott, on the other hand, represented an eclipse of feminism by the so-called "modest muse," constrained and appropriated by patriarchal figures like Samuel Richardson, and characterized by "a moralistic … colluding with the growing ideology of femininity, preaching and greatly rewarding self-sacrifice and restraint."[8] Spencer argued, similarly, that eighteenth-century women writers increasingly succeeded in the public sphere through skillful reinforcement of the ideology locating women's lives in the domestic realm. In other words, they learned to meet "the Terms of Acceptance" for their writing in order to gain acknowledgment of their talents.[9]

As Spacks noted in her review, "Todd's sympathy appears fully engaged" with Restoration and early eighteenth-century writers, but she "has more difficulty" with mid-century writers of sentiment, making their works "sound unappealing indeed," only to have "her interest intensif[y] as she considers the century's final decade."[10] Not surprisingly, such treatments led to much further work on those early and later writers where evidence of feminist convictions, or at least subversion, was relatively easy to find, especially when it took the form of representations of female sexual desire. The Restoration and early eighteenth-century writers Behn, Manley, and Eliza Haywood, for example, have been reexamined in their significantly different political and professional contexts, not only by Todd and Spencer, but also by Ros Ballaster, Catherine Ingrassia, and others.[11] Ultimately, one effect of such work has been to put pressure on a rigid separate-sphere thesis, resulting in a more nuanced approach to all women writers of this time. Recent work has increasingly represented the relation between gender ideology and the individual writer's experience and works as contested and variable. Exploiting the potential for a much-broadened perspective of eighteenth-century publication enabled by the ongoing *English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC)* project, Paula McDowell, in her exemplary 1998 study *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace 1678–1730*, employs the methods of book history to challenge the public–private gender dichotomy in the sphere of

print publication. One effect of McDowell's discovery of women's extensive engagement in a wide range of publishing activities is to challenge notions of their lack of agency in the political public sphere.[12] With respect to an individual writer, the late Restoration royalist Jane Barker, Kathryn King has in turn pointed out that reading Barker "*within* a narrative of the emerging bourgeois femininity and *against* the more flamboyant literary practices of the sex-and-scandal school of female popular fiction" is at best unhelpful for this writer marginalized in multiple senses as a Catholic, a Jacobite, an intellectual woman, and a spinster. King's study demonstrates that "gender-driven, oppositional accounts of early modern women writers, so hugely productive over the last couple of decades, have reached a point of diminishing returns and will need to be supplemented by more inclusive pictures of women's involvement in early modern culture if feminist literary history is to move forward."[13]

Indeed, feminist historians of the pre-twentieth century have for some time been raising concerns about the value of this broad-brush model as an analytical tool, in part because of its seeming applicability to any number of historical moments and because of its reliance on suspect combinations of prescriptive and descriptive sources. In her 1993 article "Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History," Amanda Vickery helpfully reviewed theoretical and methodological critiques from the late 1980s, while noting the continued reliance of historians of British women's experience on the assumption that a gendered public–private dichotomy developed in England from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries. Vickery concluded that

> the notion of separate spheres … has done modern women's history a great service. With this conceptual framework women's history moved beyond a Whiggish celebration of the rise of feminism, or a virtuous rediscovery of those previously hidden from history. In asserting the instrumental role of the ideology of separate spheres in modern class formation, historians asserted the wider historical significance of gender. Thereby the interpretation offered powerful justification for the study of women when the field was embattled. Yet strategic concerns do not in themselves justify the deployment of an artificial and unwieldy conceptual vocabulary. In the attempt to map the breadth and boundaries of female experience, new categories and concepts must be generated, and this must be done with more sensitivity to women's own manuscripts.[14]

In a similar vein, but dealing more directly with historiography of the eighteenth century, Lawrence E. Klein, in a 1995 article on "Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century," has questioned the "domestic thesis" for superimposing the two binary oppositions of male/

female and public/private to argue for "the persistent exclusion of women from public roles, power and citizenship." Klein notes that this model fails to take into account evidence that "even when theory was against them, women in the eighteenth century had [conscious] public dimensions to their lives."[15] Such work revisits Jürgen Habermas's influential discussion of the rise of the bourgeois public sphere in eighteenth-century England, in order to pry open the fissure between Habermas's scheme of a public sphere of letters which is broadly inclusive and a public political sphere which grows out of the former, but is made up of private individuals who are male, middle-class heads of households.[16]

(2005)

Notes

4 Patricia Meyer Spacks, review in *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 2 (1990), p. 364.
5 For a full outline of the model, see Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), especially chapter 1's section on "The New Ideology of Femininity" and chapter 3, "The Terms of Acceptance," and Todd, *Sign of Angellica*, Part Two, especially chapters 6 to 8.
6 Kathryn Shevelow, *Women and Print Culture: The Construction of Femininity in the Early Periodical* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 5; Todd, *Sign of Angellica*, p. 4.
7 Spencer, for example, in identifying three strands of "response" to the ideological climate for women writers – the novel of protest, the novel of conformity, and the novel of escape – acknowledges overlap between her categories, and traces manifestations of each throughout the long eighteenth century (*Rise of the Woman Novelist*, pp. ix–x, chapters 4–6).
8 Todd, *Sign of Angellica*, p. 2.
9 Spencer, *Rise of the Woman Novelist*, p. 95.
10 Spacks review, p. 365.
11 See especially the essay collection *Aphra Behn Studies*, edited by Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Spencer's *Aphra Behn's Afterlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Ros Ballaster, *Seductive Forms: Women's Amatory Fiction from 1684 to 1740* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992); Catherine Ingrassia, *Authorship, Commerce, and Gender in Early Eighteenth-Century England: A Culture of Paper Credit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Kirsten T. Saxton and Rebecca P. Bocchicchio (eds.), *The Passionate Fictions of Eliza Haywood: Essays on Her Life and Work* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000).
12 Paula McDowell, *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace 1678–1730* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).
13 Kathryn R. King, *Jane Barker, Exile: A Literary Career*, 1675–1725 (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), pp. 7–20.

14 Amanda Vickery, "Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History," *The Historical Journal* 36 (1993), p. 413. See also Vickery's own "attempt to map the breadth and boundaries of female experience," in *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

15 Lawrence E. Klein, "Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century: Some Questions about Evidence and Analytic Procedure," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29 (1995), p. 97, 102; see also Kathleen Wilson, "Citizenship, Empire, and Modernity in the English Provinces, c. 1720–1790," pp. 69–96 in the same journal issue.

16 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), pp. 51–6.