Part I

Anglo-American Feminist Criticism

1

TWO FEMINIST CLASSICS

In the 1960s, for the first time since the women's vote was won, feminism again surfaced as an important political force in the Western world. Many women now see Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, as the first sign that American women were becoming increasingly unhappy with their lot in affluent post-war society. The early initiatives towards a more specific organization of women as feminists came from activists in the civil rights movement, and later also from women involved in protest actions against the war in Vietnam.[1] Thus the 'new' feminists were politically committed activists who were not afraid to take a stand and fight for their views. The link between feminism and women's struggle for civil rights and peace was not a new one, nor was it coincidental. Many nineteenth-century American feminists, women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Antony, were first active in the struggle for the abolition of slavery. Both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries women involved in campaigns against racism soon came to see that the values and strategies that contributed to keeping blacks in their place mirrored the values and strategies invoked to keep women subservient to men. In the civil rights movement, women rightly took offence when both black and white male liberationists aggressively refused to extend their ideals to the oppression of women. Remarks like those of Stokely Carmichael:

'The only position for women in the SNCC is prone' (1966), or Eldridge Cleaver: 'Women? I guess they ought to exercise Pussy Power' (1968),[2] contributed to the alienation of many women from the male-dominated civil rights groups. In other politically progressive movements (the anti-war movements, various Marxist groups), women were experiencing the same discrepancy between male activists' egalitarian commitment and their crudely sexist behaviour towards female comrades. In the late 1960s, women were increasingly starting to form their own liberation groups, both as a supplement and an alternative to the other forms of political struggle in which they were involved.

By 1970, there were already many different strands of political thought in the 'new' women's movement. Robin Morgan clearly characterizes NOW (National Organization of Women), the organization founded by Betty Friedan, as middle-class, liberal and reformist, declaring that the 'only hope of a new feminist movement is some kind of only now barely emerging politics of *revolutionary feminism*' (xxiii). Though Morgan is hazy about the definition of 'revolutionary' in this statement (does it mean anti-capitalist, separatist, or both?), it is clear that two major brands of modern feminism were already crystallizing as conflicting tendencies within the broad spectrum of the women's movement. The bibliography and contact addresses in *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*, edited by Robin Morgan and published in 1970, run to 26 pages, amply documenting the fact that by 1970 the women's movement as we now know it was well-established in the USA.

What then, was the role of literary criticism in this movement? The densely printed pages of bibliography in *Sisterhood is Powerful* yield only five references to works wholly or partly concerned with literature: Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1927), Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Katharine M. Rogers's *The Troublesome Helpmate* (1966), Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* (1968) and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969). These works, then, form the basis for the explosive development of Anglo-American feminist criticism. *Sisterhood is Powerful* carries only one article on literature (the first chapter of Kate Millett's essay).

If we are to judge by Robin Morgan's selection, then, literary criticism was hardly a central factor in the early period of the new women's

movement. Much like any other radical critic, the feminist critic can be seen as the product of a struggle mainly concerned with social and political change; her specific role within it becomes an attempt to extend such general political action to the cultural domain. This cultural/political battle is necessarily two-pronged: it must work to realize its objective both through institutional changes and through the medium of literary criticism. For many feminist critics, a central problem has therefore been that of uniting political engagement with what is conventionally regarded as 'good' literary criticism. For if the existing criteria of what counts as 'good' are laid down by white bourgeois males, there seems little chance of feminist work satisfying the very criteria it is trying to challenge and subvert. The aspiring feminist critic, then, has apparently only two options: to work to reform those criteria from within the academic institution, producing a judicious critical discourse that strives to maintain its feminism without grossly upsetting the academic establishment, or to write off the academic criteria of evaluation as reactionary and of no importance to her work.

In the early stages of feminist criticism in particular, some feminists, such as Lillian S. Robinson, consciously chose the second option:

> Some people are trying to make an honest woman out of the feminist critic, to claim that every 'worthwhile' department should stock one. I am not terribly interested in whether feminist criticism becomes a respectable part of academic criticism; I am very much concerned that feminist critics become a useful part of the women's movement.
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> (35)

This has not, however, been the most typical response to the apparent dilemma. Like all other literary critics, the overwhelming majority of feminist critics in the 1980s work within academic institutions, and are thus inevitably caught up in the professional struggle for jobs, tenure and promotion. This professionalization of feminist criticism is not necessarily a negative phenomenon, but, as we shall see later, the real or apparent conflict between critical standards and political engagement recurs in various guises in the writings of feminist critics throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. One of the reasons for Kate Millett's success may be that she, as no other feminist critic, managed

to bridge the gap between institutional and non-institutional criticism: *Sexual Politics* must surely be the world's best-selling PhD thesis. The book earned Millett an academic degree at a reputable university, and also had a powerful political impact on a world-wide audience both inside and outside the women's movement.

KATE MILLETT

Sexual Politics is divided into three parts: 'Sexual politics', 'Historical background' and 'The literary reflection'. The first part presents Millett's thesis about the nature of power relationships between the sexes, the second surveys the fate of feminist struggle and its opponents in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the final section sets out to show how the sexual power-politics described in her preceding chapters is enacted in the works of D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer and Jean Genet. The book established the feminist approach to literature as a critical force to be reckoned with. Its impact makes it the 'mother' and precursor of all later works of feminist criticism in the Anglo-American tradition, and feminists of the 1970s and 1980s have never been reluctant to acknowledge their debt to, or disagreement with, Millett's path-breaking essay. Her criticism represented a striking break with the ideology of American New Criticism, which at that time still retained a dominant position within the literary academy. In courageous opposition to the New Critics, Millett argued that social and cultural contexts must be studied if literature was to be properly understood, a view she shares with all later feminist critics regardless of their otherwise differing interests.

The most striking aspect of Millett's critical studies, though, is the boldness with which she reads 'against the grain' of the literary text. Her approach to Miller or Mailer is devoid of what was in 1969 a conventional respect for the authority and intentions of the author. Her analysis openly posits another perspective from the author's, and shows how precisely such *conflict* between reader and author/text can expose the underlying premises of a work. Millett's importance as a literary critic lies in her relentless defence of the reader's right to posit her own viewpoint, rejecting the received hierarchy of text and reader. As a reader, Kate Millett is thus neither submissive nor lady-like: her

style is that of a hard-nosed street kid out to challenge the author's authority at every turn. Her approach destroys the prevailing image of the reader/critic as passive/feminine recipient of *author*itarian discourse, and as such is exactly suited to feminism's political purposes.

Unfortunately for later feminist critics, the positive aspects of Millett's study are entangled with a series of less-successful tactics, which seriously flaw *Sexual Politics* as a feminist literary study. While readily acknowledging Millett's importance, many feminists have noticed with dismay her extreme reluctance to acknowledge any debt to her own feminist precursors. Her views of patriarchal politics are obviously deeply influenced by Simone de Beauvoir's pioneering analysis in *The Second Sex*, but this debt is never acknowledged by Millett, who makes only two tangential references to Beauvoir's essay. Though Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* contains many discussions of Norman Mailer's work, often quoting the very passages that Millett later selects for her own book, the latter only briefly mentions Ellmann's 'witty essay' (329), and acknowledges no direct influence. Katharine M. Rogers's study of misogyny in literature is mentioned in a general footnote (45), but though her thesis about the cultural causes of male misogyny is strikingly similar to Millett's own, it is passed over in silence.

This astonishing absence in a feminist writer of due recognition of her feminist precursors is also evident in Millett's treatment of women authors. We have already seen that she dismisses Virginia Woolf in one brief passage; in fact, with the sole exception of Charlotte Brontë, *Sexual Politics* deals exclusively with male authors. It is as if Millett wishes consciously or unconsciously to suppress the evidence of earlier antipatriarchal works, not least if her precursors were women: she discusses John Stuart Mill at length, for example, but not Mary Wollstonecraft. That she chooses to read the French homosexual Jean Genet's texts as representations of a subversive perception of gender roles and sexual politics, but never even mentions women writers like Edith Wharton or Doris Lessing, reinforces this impression. It is as if Millett, to give birth to her own text, must at all cost reject any possible 'mother-figures'.

There are, however, more concrete reasons for Millett's superficial treatment of other women writers and theoreticians. Millett defines the 'essence of politics' as power, seeking to prove that 'However muted its

present appearance may be, sexual dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concepts of power' (25). Her definition of sexual politics is simply this: the process whereby the ruling sex seeks to maintain and extend its power over the subordinate sex. Her book as a whole is the elaboration of this single statement, rhetorically structured so as to demonstrate the persistence and pervasiveness of this process throughout cultural life. All of Millett's topics and examples are chosen for their capacity to illustrate this thesis. As a rhetorical statement, the book is therefore remarkably unified, a powerful fist in the solar plexus of patriarchy. Every detail is organically subordinated to the political message, and this, one might claim, is the real motive for Millett's reluctance to acknowledge her forceful female precursors. For to devote much of her book to analysing patterns of subversion in women writers would unwittingly undermine her own thesis about the remorseless, all-encompassing, monolithic nature of sexual power-politics. Millett's view of sexual ideology cannot account for the evident fact that throughout history a few exceptional women have indeed managed to resist the full pressure of patriarchal ideology, becoming conscious of their own oppression and voicing their opposition to male power. Only a concept of ideology as a *contradictory* construct, marked by gaps, slides and inconsistencies, would enable feminism to explain how even the severest ideological pressures will generate their own lacunae.

Millett's limited theory of patriarchal oppression also explains her unwillingness to acknowledge Katharine M. Rogers's contribution to the study of sexism in literature. In her study of male misogyny, Rogers lists a variety of cultural reasons for the phenomenon: 1) rejection of or guilt about sex; 2) a reaction against the idealization with which men have glorified women; 3) patriarchal feeling, the wish to keep women subject to men. This last reason, Rogers claims, is the 'most important cause of misogyny, because the most widely and firmly entrenched in society' (272). Millett's own thesis comes extremely close to Rogers's third proposition, a fact that one might expect her to acknowledge. Instead, Millett does not refer to this part of Rogers's work, and persists in arguing her own theory of one single cause of patriarchal oppression. Her reductionist approach leads her to explain

all cultural phenomena *purely* in terms of power politics, as for instance in her account of the courtly love tradition:

> One must acknowledge that the chivalrous stance is a game the master group plays in elevating its subject to pedestal level. . . . As the sociologist Hugo Beigel has observed, both the courtly and the romantic versions of love are 'grants' which the male concedes out of his total power. Both have had the effect of obscuring the patriarchal character of Western culture and in their general tendency to attribute impossible virtues to women, have ended by confining them in a narrow and often remarkably conscribing sphere of behavior.
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> (37)

The rhetorical requirements of Millett's thesis also force her into sometimes inaccurate or truncated accounts of opposing theories. Her widely influential presentation of Freudian and post-Freudian theory sets out to prove that 'Sigmund Freud was beyond question the strongest individual counterrevolutionary force in the ideology of sexual politics during the period' (178). But any rhetorical reduction of contradiction is bound to have particularly damaging effects in the case of Freud, whose texts are notoriously difficult to pin down to a single, unified position – not only because of his theory of the unconscious, but also because of his constant revisions of his own standpoint. Millett's brusque technique is to discard all Freud's own confessions of tentativeness and uncertainty as mere 'moments of humble confusion' (178), before proceeding to what she sees as a savage demolition of psychoanalytical theory – a demolition that can now be demonstrated to be based on misreadings and misunderstandings on Millett's part. Her final diatribe against Freud and psychoanalytic theory claims without nuance or reservation that psychoanalysis is a form of biological essentialism – that is, a theory that reduces all behaviour to inborn sexual characteristics:

> Now it can be said scientifically that women are inherently subservient, and males dominant, more strongly sexed and therefore entitled to sexually subjugate the female, who enjoys her oppression and deserves it, for she is by her very nature vain, stupid, and hardly better

> than barbarian, if she is human at all. Once this bigotry has acquired the cachet of science, the counterrevolution may proceed pretty smoothly.
>
> (203)

Millett's rejection of Freud rests largely on her distaste for what she takes to be his theories of penis envy, female narcissism and female masochism. But these readings of Freud have now been powerfully challenged by other feminists. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose have persuasively argued that Freud does not take sexual identity to be an inborn, biological essence, and that Freudian psychoanalysis in fact sees sexual identity as an unstable subject position which is culturally and socially constructed in the process of the child's insertion into human society. As for Millett's interpretation of penis envy and female narcissism and masochism, these too have all been challenged by other women: Sarah Kofman and Ulrike Prokop have both in different contexts read Freud's account of the narcissistic woman as a representation of female power, and Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel has argued a cogent case for seeing female penis envy as a manifestation of the little girl's need to establish a sense of her own identity as separate from the mother, a process which for Chasseguet-Smirgel is crucial for the later development of the woman's creativity.

Another interesting aspect of Millett's account of Freud is that she effectively suppresses all references to Freud's arguably most fundamental insight: the influence of unconscious desire on conscious action. As Cora Kaplan has convincingly argued, Millett's theory of sexual ideology as a set of false beliefs deployed against women by a conscious, well-organized male conspiracy ignores the fact that not all misogyny is conscious, and that even women may unconsciously internalize sexist attitudes and desires. In her discussion of *Sexual Politics*, Kaplan emphasizes the consequences of this view for Millett's selection of authors to be discussed:

> Gender renegades such as Mill and Engels, are allowed to espouse contradictions, but Feminism itself must be positivistic, fully conscious, morally and politically correct. It must know what it wants, and since what many women wanted was full of contradictions and

> confusions, still entangled in what patriarchy wanted them to be or wanted for them, Millett does not let them reveal too much of their 'weakness'.
>
> (10)

During the first part of the 1970s, at least until the publication in 1974 of Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, Millett's unremittingly negative account of psychoanalysis remained mostly unchallenged among feminists in England and America. As late as 1976, Patricia Meyer Spacks (35) praised the account of psychoanalysis in *Sexual Politics* as one of the book's strong points. Though, as we have seen, there exists today a varied, highly developed body of feminist readings and appropriations of Freudian theory, Millett's denunciation of psychoanalysis is still widely accepted by feminists both inside and outside the women's movement. The continuing effectiveness of her views on this point may be linked to the fact that her theory of sexual oppression as a conscious, monolithic plot against women leads to a seductively optimistic view of the possibilities for full liberation. For Millett, woman is an oppressed being without a recalcitrant unconscious to reckon with; she merely has to see through the false ideology of the ruling male patriarchy in order to cast it off and be free. If, however, we accept with Freud that all human beings – even women – may internalize the standards of their oppressors, and that they may distressingly identify with their own persecutors, liberation can no longer be seen solely as the logical consequence of a rational exposure of the false beliefs on which patriarchal rule is based.

Millett's literary criticism is flawed by the same relentless rhetorical reductionism that mars her critique of more general cultural theories. A case in point is her reading of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. As Patricia Spacks has pointed out, this contains some serious and elementary misreadings: Millett states that 'Lucy will not marry Paul even after the tyrant has softened' (146), even though Brontë has Lucy accept Paul Emmanuel's offer of future marriage; she also comments that 'The keeper turned kind must be eluded anyway; Paul turned lover is drowned' (146), when in fact Brontë leaves the question of Paul's possible death unsettlingly open so that the reader may construct her own conclusion to the text. One might agree with Spacks, however, that

what Millett's readings lack in style and accuracy they make up for in passion and engagement. The force of Millett's eloquent, angry indictments indeed lends considerable authority to her survey of male sexual violence against women as displayed in modern literature: there can be no doubt that the writers she attacks (principally Henry Miller and Norman Mailer) do exhibit an offensive interest in male degradations of female sexuality. But Millett's critical readings, like her cultural analysis, are guided by a monolithic conception of sexual ideology that renders her impervious to nuances, inconsistencies and ambiguities in the works she examines. For Millett, it appears, everything is dichotomy or opposition, utterly black or untaintedly white. Though she recognizes that Lucy Snowe in *Villette* is trapped in the sexual and cultural contradictions of her time, she nevertheless lambasts Brontë for the 'deviousness of her fictional devices, her continual flirtation with the bogs of sentimentality which period feeling mandates she sink in' (146). She rejects as a purely conventional device the irruption of romantic ('sentimental') discourse into the predominantly realist *Villette*, whereas later feminist critics, particularly Mary Jacobus ('The buried letter'), have shown that it is precisely in the fissures and dislocations created by this irruption that we can locate some of the deeper implications of sexuality and femininity in the novel.

As a literary critic, Millett pays little or no attention to the formal structures of the literary text: hers is pure content analysis. She also unproblematically assumes the identity of author, narrator and hero when this suits her case, and statements like 'Paul Morel is of course Lawrence himself' (246) abound. The title of the main literary section of *Sexual Politics* is 'The literary reflection', which would seem to imply a somewhat mechanical, simplistic theory of the relationship between literature and the social and cultural forces she has previously discussed. But Millett does not in fact succeed in showing exactly what literature is a reflection of, or precisely how it reflects. The title keeps us suspended in mid-air, positing a relationship between the literary and some other region, a relationship which is neither explicitly stated nor detailedly explored.

Sexual Politics, then, can hardly be taken as a model for later generations of feminist critics. Indeed even Millett's radical assault on hierarchical modes of reading, which posit the author as a god-like

authority to be humbly hearkened to by the reader/critic, has its limits. She can produce this admirably iconoclastic form of reading only because her study treats of texts that she rightly finds deeply distasteful: those written by male authors positing and parading male sexual supremacy. Feminist criticism in the 1970s and 1980s, by contrast, has focused mainly on women's texts. Since Millett avoids any feminist or female-authored text (except *Villette*), she is not confronted with the problem of how to read women's texts. Can they be read in the same splendidly anti-authoritarian fashion? Or must women reading women's texts take up the old, respectfully subordinate stance in relation to the author? Kate Millett's criticism, wholly preoccupied as it is with the abominable male, can give us no guidance on these matters.

MARY ELLMANN

Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* (1968) was published before Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*. If I choose to discuss it after Millett's essay, this in part reflects the fact that Ellmann's brilliant book never became as influential as Millett's among feminists at large. The more narrow appeal of Ellmann's essay is probably in large measure due to the fact that *Thinking About Women* does not deal with the political and historical aspects of patriarchy independently of literary analysis. As Ellmann herself puts it in her preface: 'I am most interested in women as *words*' (xv), an approach that gives her book a direct appeal to feminists with literary interests, though it is quite clearly written for a general readership rather than for a specialized academic one. Where Millett's text abounds in footnotes and bibliography, Ellmann's relatively few footnotes are mostly sardonic or satirical, and she gives her more academic readers no bibliography to peruse. Together with Millett's essay, Ellmann's book constitutes the basic source of inspiration for what is often called 'Images of Women' criticism, the search for female stereotypes in the work of male writers and in the critical categories employed by male reviewers commenting on women's work. This type of criticism will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

The main thesis of *Thinking About Women* is that Western culture at all levels is permeated by a phenomenon Ellmann labels 'thought by sexual analogy'. According to Ellmann, this can best be described as our

general tendency to 'comprehend all phenomena, however shifting, in terms of our original and simple sexual differences; and . . . classify almost all experience by means of sexual analogy' (6). This intellectual habit deeply influences our perception of the world: 'Ordinarily, not only sexual terms but sexual opinions are imposed upon the external world. All forms are subsumed by our concept of male and female temperament' (8). The purpose of Ellmann's essay is to expose the ludicrous and illogical nature of this sexual mode of thought. She therefore sets out to give us an example of the kind of society in which thinking by sexual analogy might be justified, before contrasting this with our own situation:

> Men are stronger than women, and the reproductive role of women is more prolonged and more arduous than men. An utterly practical (though not an ideal) society would be one in which these facts were of such importance that all men and women were totally absorbed in their demonstration – that is in the use of strength and the completion of pregnancies. Both sexes would live without intermissions in which to recognize their own monotony or, more often, to describe the complex fascination in which their senses disguised it . . .
>
> But leisure is primarily mindful, and as we escape the exigency of sexual roles, we more fully indulge the avocation of sexual analogies. The proportions of the two seem particularly grotesque now when the roles themselves have taken on an unprecedented irrelevance. It is strangely as though we had come upon circumstances which render the physiology of sex nearly superfluous, and therefore comic in its eager and generous self-display.
>
> (2–3)

In our modern world the reproductive capacity of women has become socially almost obsolescent, and the physical strength of men gratuitous. We should therefore no longer feel the need to think in sexual stereotypes of the 'male = strong and active' and 'female = weak and passive' kind. But, as *Thinking About Women* amply documents, these and similar sexual categories influence all aspects of human life, not least so-called intellectual activities, where, as Ellmann points out, the

metaphors of fertilization, gestation, pregnancy and birth are of central importance.

Ellmann's second chapter, 'Phallic criticism', deals with sexual analogy in the field of literary criticism. Her analysis of this phenomenon can be gleaned from the following passage:

> With a kind of inverted fidelity, the discussion of women's books by men will arrive punctually at the point of preoccupation, which is the fact of femininity. Books by women are treated as though they themselves were women, and criticism embarks, at its happiest, upon an intellectual measuring of busts and hips.
>
> (29)

One of the most comic instances of 'phallic criticism' is Ellmann's spoof of a male reviewer's treatment of Françoise Sagan; for the sake of brevity, I first quote the male review and then immediately juxtapose Ellmann's countermove:

> Poor old Françoise Sagan. Just one more old-fashioned old-timer, bypassed in the rush for the latest literary vogue and for youth. Superficially, her career in America resembles the lifespan of those medieval beauties who flowered at 14, were deflowered at 15, were old at 30 and crones at 40.

From a review of a new novel by the popular French novelist, François Sagan:

> Poor old François Sagan. . . . Superficially, his career in America resembles the life-span of those medieval troubadours who masturbated at 14, copulated at 15, were impotent at 30 and prostate cases at 40.
>
> (30)

In the largest single section of her book, Ellmann then sums up the eleven major stereotypes of femininity as presented by male writers and critics: formlessness, passivity, instability, confinement, piety, materiality, spirituality, irrationality, compliancy, and finally 'the two

incorrigible figures' of the Witch and the Shrew. The fourth chapter, entitled 'Differences in tone', discusses the assertion that 'the male body lends credence to assertions while the female takes it away' (148). Ellmann's point is that men have traditionally chosen to write in an assertive, authoritarian mode, whereas women have been confined to the language of sensibility. Since the 1960s, however, much modern literature has sought to resist or subvert authoritarian modes of writing, and this has created the conditions for a new kind of writing by women:

> I hope to define the way in which it is now possible for women to write well. Quite simply, having not had physical or intellectual authority before, they have no reason to resist a literature at odds with authority. (166)

Since Ellmann's own favourites among modern women writers are Dorothy Richardson, Ivy Compton-Burnett and Nathalie Sarraute (but oddly enough not Virginia Woolf), we can see where her distaste for authority and also of traditional realism takes her.

Ellmann's point about the authority we consciously or unconsciously accord to male over female voices has been beautifully illustrated by the Danish feminist critic Pil Dahlerup in an article entitled 'Unconscious attitudes of a reviewer', published in Sweden in 1972. Here Dahlerup discusses the response of one particular male reviewer to the Danish poet Cecil Bødtker's poetry. Cecil being an ungendered name in Danish, the critic automatically assumed that he was dealing with a male poet in his review of her first collection of poetry (1955). This glowing review abounds in active verbs and has relatively few adjectives, though the ones that do occur are powerfully positive ones: 'joyous', 'enthusiastic', 'rich', and so on. A year later the same critic reviewed Cecil Bødtker's second collection of poetry. By now he had discovered that she was a woman, and though he still was warmly enthusiastic about her poetry the vocabulary of praise has undergone an interesting transformation: now Cecil Bødtker's poetry is no more than 'pleasant', there are three times as many adjectives, and these have not only changed in nature ('pretty', 'healthy', 'down to earth'), but also show an alarming propensity for taking on modifiers

('somewhat', 'a certain', 'probably' – none of which occurred in the first review). Furthermore, the adjectives 'little' or 'small' suddenly become central in the critic's discourse, whereas they only made one appearance in the 'male' review. As Dahlerup puts it: 'the male poet apparently did not write a single "small" poem'. Her conclusion is that the critic's attitude unconsciously reveals the fact that, as Mary Ellmann suggests, male reviewers just cannot attach the same degree of authority to a voice they know to be female. Even when they do give a good review to a woman they automatically select adjectives and phrases that tend to make the woman's poetry charming and sweet (as women should be), as opposed to serious and significant (as men are supposed to be).

Ellmann's final chapter, entitled 'Responses', deals with the various strategies employed by women writers to cope with the patriarchal onslaught described in her first four chapters. She shows how women writers have known how to exploit, for their own subversive purposes, the stereotypes of them and their writing created by men. Jane Austen, for instance, undermines the authoritarian voice of the writer by her wit and irony – or, as Ellmann puts it, 'We assume that authority and responsibility are incompatible with amusement' (209). But Ellmann's praise of Jane Austen's prose is also highly relevant to her own way of writing. *Thinking About Women* is an ironic masterpiece, and the wit Ellmann displays throughout her book (though less in the 'Responses' section), is, as we shall see, an important part of her argument. Ellmann's sardonic humour contributed significantly to the warm critical reception of her book, though ironically enough some critics were unable to resist the temptation to couch their praise in precisely the stereotypical terms that Ellmann denounces. The back of the Harvest edition of *Thinking About Women*, for instance, displays the following example of fervent praise: 'The sexual silliness which warps our thinking about women has never been so well exposed. But the best and most fervent accolade last: Mary Ellmann has written a funny feminist book.' In other words: we all know that feminists are dreary puritans, so all the more reason for praising Ellmann as an exception to the rule. Or as Ellmann herself puts it, when discussing the way in which sexual analogy infects the praise of work that deserves 'asexual' approval:

> In this case, enthusiasm issues in the explanation of the ways in which the work is free of what the critic ordinarily dislikes in the work of a woman. He had despaired of ever seeing a birdhouse built by a woman; now *here* is a birdhouse built by a woman. Pleasure may mount even to an admission of male envy of the work examined: an exceptionally sturdy birdhouse at that!
>
> (31)

But what exactly is the effect on her own arguments of Ellmann's lavish use of irony? Patricia Meyer Spacks feels that Ellmann writes 'in the distinctive voice of a woman' (23), and that the specific femininity of her discourse consists in its display of 'a particularly feminine sort and function of wit' (24). Spacks continues:

> A new category suggests itself for her: not the passivity of formlessness or the purposelessness of instability, but the feminine resource of evasiveness. The opponent who would presume to attack her finds her not where she was when he took aim. She embodies woman as quicksilver, always in brilliant, erratic motion.
>
> (24)

Spacks here evades the concept of *irony* perhaps because this has never been considered a specifically feminine mode. Instead she centres on the accusation of 'evasiveness', and tries to invent a new feminine stereotype that would accommodate Ellmann's way of writing. But this is surely to miss the point of her style. I will attempt to show that it is precisely through the use of satirical devices that Ellmann manages to demonstrate first that the very concepts of masculinity and femininity are social constructs which refer to no real essence in the world, and second that the feminine stereotypes she describes invariably deconstruct themselves. The point can be made through a closer look at her presentation of the stereotype of 'the Mother';

> The Mother is particularly useful as an illustration of *the explosive tendency*: each stereotype has a limit; swelled to it, the stereotype explodes. Its ruin takes two forms: (1) total vulgarization and (2) a reorganization of the advantage, now in fragments, about a new

> center of disadvantage. In this second form, the same elements which had constituted the previous ideal make up the present anathema.
>
> (131)

This is also one of the very few passages where Ellmann explicitly sums up the theory behind the rhetorical strategy of her book. For most of the time she is content to show through practical illustrations how the stereotype is both ideal and horror, inclusive as well as exclusive – as for instance where she first demonstrates how 'the Mother' as a stereotype slides from venerated idol to castrating and aggressive bitch, and then continues:

> But our distrust of maternity is an innocuous preoccupation in contrast to our resentment of those who do not take part in it. Nothing is more reliable than the irritability of all references to prolonged virginity: behind us, and undoubtedly before us, stretch infinite tracts of abuse of *maiden ladies, old maids, schoolmarms, dried-up spinsters*, etc., etc.
>
> (136)

Here the use of the plural pronouns 'our' and 'us' comfortably suggest that the narrator is doing no more than pointing out something 'we all' indulge in, whereas the implication of her first sentence, with its powerful paradox, is that 'we' must be either mad or stupid to pursue such an illogical practice. The narrative devices deployed here work to make the reader ('we') reject the stupidity described, while at the same time softening the blow with the reassuring use of 'us' and 'our'. If the narrator includes herself in this example of malpractice, 'we' at least don't have to feel *alone* in our stupidity. But this is not the only effect of Ellmann's tactical use of the first person plural here. It also makes it impossible for the reader to reject the implications of the paradox of the first sentence: since the narrator does not position herself at a different level from us, but on the contrary is to be found among us, 'we' are deprived of a convenient external target for our aggression. In these sentences there is simply no single instance we can choose to attack as a man-hating, castrating bitch if we feel thus inclined. Thus the reader's nagging suspicion that the narrator *after all*

may be pulling his (or her) leg, that she might just not entirely count herself as one of 'us', can find no target, and her or his mounting aggression is therefore defused in the very act that kindles it.

This narrative technique cannot in my view be labelled 'feminine elusiveness', since it is an integral part of a general rhetorical enterprise that seeks to deconstruct our sexual categories in exactly the same way as the reader's aggression here is both fostered and defused. The effect of Ellmann's irony is to expose two different aspects of patriarchal ideology. In the first passage quoted above, she states abstractly the way in which any stereotype is self-destructive, easily transformed into its own unstable contradiction, and thereby demonstrates that such stereotypes' only existence is as verbal constructs in the service of ruling patriarchal ideology. But unlike Millett, Ellmann does not for a moment fall prey to the fiction that this ruling ideology forms a consistent and unified whole. On the contrary, both passages amply illustrate the self-contradictory tangles that emerge as soon as one aspect of this ideology is confronted with another.

Thinking About Women abounds in examples of this deconstructive, decentring style. Ellmann's favourite method is to juxtapose contradictory statements while depriving the reader of any authorial comment, as for instance in the following passage: 'When men are searching for the truth, women are content with lies. But when men are searching for diversion or variety, women counter with their stultifying respect for immediate duty' (93–4). The absence of an identifiable narrator's voice here fulfils a role similar to the consoling presence of the possibly treacherous 'us' in the passage discussed above: deprived of authoritative commentary as to which of the positions advanced the narrator wishes the reader to accept, she is kept reading on in the hope of finding such a guideline for interpretation. Such 'anchoring points' can in fact be found in *Thinking About Women* – indeed the paragraph just quoted is preceded by a fairly straightforward statement: 'At any rate, the incongruity of deceit and piety represents only another of the necessary sacrifices of logic to contrast' (93). Though it seems obvious here that the narrator finds such oppositions incongruous and that they represent a sacrifice of logic, this evaluation is not allowed to stand wholly unchallenged: the sacrifice of logic is characterized as 'necessary', and this single adjective is enough to throw the

reader back into uncertainty. Necessary for whom? Or for what higher purpose? Does the narrator endorse this evaluation of necessity or not? The irony here is weaker because of the evaluative 'incongruity' that is allowed to dominate the first part of the sentence, but it is still not wholly absent. Even when Ellmann allows her discourse to be fixed to a certain position, she takes care to avoid total paralysis: there is always a trace of unsettling wit somewhere in her sentences.

When Patricia Spacks characterizes Ellmann's style as essentially feminine, as an example of the way in which 'the woman critic demonstrates how feminine charm can combat masculine forcefulness' (26), she falls into the very metaphysical trap that Ellmann seeks to deconstruct. *Thinking About Women* is, after all, a book about the insidious effects of thinking by sexual analogy, not a recommendation that we should continue the practice. In order to ensure that the reader gets this point, Ellmann first proclaims quite unequivocally that 'it seems impossible to determine a sexual sentence' (172), and quotes Virginia Woolf to reinforce her view. For Ellmann, then, sexuality is *not* visible at the level of sentence construction or rhetorical strategies. She therefore praises Jane Austen's irony precisely for its capacity to enable us to think *outside* of (or *elsewhere* than) the field of sexual analogy: 'Jane Austen . . . had available to her imagination a scene which must now seem to us singularly monistic: neither sex appears to be good or bad for much' (212).

As part of her deconstructive project, Ellmann therefore recommends *exploiting* the sexual stereotypes for all they are worth for our own political purposes. This, at least, is her own practice in *Thinking About Women*. When Patricia Spacks holds that Ellmann's style is elusive, it is because she believes that behind the 'charming' facade her text hides a good deal of 'feminine anger' (27). The implication is that whereas Kate Millett, according to Spacks, lets her anger show through in passionate if muddled and obfuscating sentences, Mary Ellmann conceals the same anger somewhere under her elegant wit. This argument is based on two assumptions: that feminists must at all costs be angry all the time, and that all textual uncertainty such as that created by irony must be explained in the end by reference to an underlying, essential and unitary cause. But, as the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin has shown in his influential study of Rabelais (*Rabelais and His World*),

anger is not the only revolutionary attitude available to us. The power of laughter can be just as subversive, as when carnival turns the old hierarchies upside-down, erasing old differences, producing new and unstable ones.

Ellmann's suavely polished wit makes us laugh. But it may not, after all, make us laugh in quite the carnivalesque way of a Rabelais. How then should we evaluate the effects of her book? Politically speaking, the ironist is extremely hard to assail precisely because it is virtually impossible to fix her or his text convincingly. In the ironic discourse, every position undercuts itself, thus leaving the politically engaged writer in a position where her ironic discourse might just come to deconstruct her own politics. Mary Ellmann's solution to this dilemma is to furnish enough non-ironic 'anchoring-points' in her own text to make the position from which she is speaking reasonably clear. This method, however, carries the obvious danger of undermining the satire it seeks to preserve. Ellmann chooses to write the last section, 'Responses', from a fairly 'direct' point of view, thus leaving irony to the sections dealing with male discourse on women. Since the more conventionally written final section does not deal with the same problems as the ironic parts of the book, this still leaves a gap, a space for the necessary uncertainty of ironic discourse.[3]

There is, then, no reason to argue that Mary Ellmann's sardonic prose should be *inherently* less unsettling than Kate Millett's explicit anger. The best-selling British competitor to Millett's book, Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), also relies on irony, and has been none the less influential in the women's movement for all that.[4] Patricia Spack's reaction to Ellmann's essay – on the one hand taking stereotypes for essentialist categories, on the other hand stipulating anger as the fundamental feminist emotion – is paradigmatic of the general feminist reception of *Thinking About Women*. For though the feminist critics who in the early 1970s took up the brand of feminist criticism known as 'Images of Women' criticism often invoke Ellmann as one of their precursors, they invariably proceed to adopt the very categories Ellmann tries to deconstruct as models for their own readings.

2

'IMAGES OF WOMEN' CRITICISM

The 'Images of Women' approach to literature has proved to be an extremely fertile branch of feminist criticism, at least in terms of the actual number of works it has generated: specialist bibliographies list hundreds if not thousands of items under this heading. In order to limit the amount of bibliographical references in the following account of its aims and methods, I will refer mainly to the articles printed in one central collection of essays, suitably enough entitled *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*. In American colleges in the early 1970s, the great majority of courses on women in literature centred on the study of female stereotypes in male writing (Register, 28). *Images of Women in Fiction* was published in 1972 as the first hardback textbook aimed at this rapidly expanding academic market. The book obviously corresponded to a deeply felt need among teachers and students, since it was reprinted several times in rapid succession.[1] What kind of perspectives, then, does this book present as 'feminist'? In her preface, the editor, Susan Koppelman Cornillon, states that the idea for the book came from her own experience in teaching women's studies:

> In all courses I felt the desperate need for books that would study literature as being writings about *people*. This volume is an effort to

> supply that need. . . . These essays lead us into fiction and then back out again into reality, into ourselves and our own lives. . . . This book will be a useful tool for raising consciousness not only in classrooms, but for those not involved in the academic world who are committed to personal growth.
>
> (x)

The new field of feminist literary studies is here presented as one essentially concerned with nurturing personal growth and raising the individual consciousness by linking literature to life, particularly to the lived experience of the reader. This fundamental outlook is reflected in the essays of all the 21 contributors (19 women, 2 men). Both male and female authors, mostly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are studied in these essays, and both sexes come in for harsh criticism for their creation of 'unreal' female characters. Indeed, the editor, in her essay 'The fiction of fiction', accuses women writers of being *worse* than male writers in this respect, since they, unlike the men, are betraying their own sex.

In 'Images of Women' criticism the act of reading is seen as a communication between the life ('experience') of the author and the life of the reader. When the reader becomes a critic, her duty is to present an account of her own life that will enable *her* readers to become aware of the position from which she speaks. In one of the essays in *Images of Women in Fiction*, Florence Howe succinctly presents this demand for autobiography in criticism:

> I begin with autobiography because it is there, in our consciousness about our own lives, that the connection between feminism and literature begins. That we learn from lives is, of course, a fundamental assumption of literature and of its teacher-critics.
>
> (255)

Such an emphasis upon the reader's right to learn about the writer's experience strongly supports the basic feminist contention that no criticism is 'value-free', that we all speak from a specific position shaped by cultural, social, political and personal factors. It is authoritarian and manipulative to present this limited perspective as 'universal',

feminists claim, and the only democratic procedure is to supply the reader with all necessary information about the limitations of one's own perspective at the outset. The importance of this principle cannot be overestimated: it remains one of the fundamental assumptions of any feminist critic to date.

Problems do however arise if we are too sanguine about the actual possibility of making one's own position clear. Hermeneutical theory, for instance, has pointed out that we cannot fully grasp our own 'horizon of understanding': there will always be unstated blindspots, fundamental presuppositions and 'pre-understandings' of which we are unaware. Psychoanalysis furthermore informs us that the most powerful motivations of our psyche often turn out to be those we have most deeply repressed. It is therefore difficult to believe that we can ever fully be aware of our own perspective. The prejudices one is *able* to formulate consciously are precisely for that reason likely to be the least important ones. These theoretical difficulties are not just abstract problems for the philosophers among us: they return to manifest themselves quite evidently in the texts of the feminist critic who tries to practise the autobiographical ideal in her work. In trying to state her own personal experience as a necessary background for the understanding of her research interests, she may for instance discover, to her cost, that there is no obvious end to the amount of 'relevant' detail that might be taken into account in such a context. She then runs the risk of reading like a more or less unwilling exhibitionist rather than a partisan of egalitarian criticism. One such extreme case can be found in a feminist study of Simone de Beauvoir, where, in the middle of the book, the critic suddenly decides to spend sixteen pages on an autobiographical account of her own life and her feelings about Beauvoir.[2] This kind of narcissistic delving into one's own self can only caricature the valuable point of principle made by feminist critics: that no criticism is neutral, and that we therefore have a responsibility to make our position reasonably apparent to our readers. Whether this is necessarily always best done through autobiographical statements about the critic's emotional and personal life is a more debatable point.

As one reads on in *Images of Women in Fiction*, one quickly becomes aware of the fact that to study 'images of women' in fiction is equivalent to studying *false* images of women in fiction written by both sexes.

The 'image' of women in literature is invariably defined in opposition to the 'real person' whom literature somehow never quite manages to convey to the reader. In Cornillon's volume, 'reality' and 'experience' are presented as the highest goals of literature, the essential truths that must be rendered by all forms of fiction. This viewpoint occasionally leads to an almost absurd 'ultra-realist' position, as when, for instance, Cornillon points out that a significant part of the modern American woman's life is spent shaving her legs and removing hairs from various other parts of her body. She rightly emphasizes the degrading and oppressive nature of the male demand for well-shaved women, but then goes on to make her main literary point: 'And yet, with all that attaches itself to female leg-shaving slavery, I have never seen any fictional character either shave or pluck a hair' (117).

I would not be surprised if Cornillon turned out to be right – toenail clipping and the disposal of sanitary towels also seem neglected as fictional themes – but her complaint rests on the highly questionable notion that art can and should reflect life accurately and inclusively in every detail. The extreme reflectionism (or 'naturalism' in Lukács's sense of the word) advocated in *Images of Women in Fiction* has the advantage of emphasizing the way in which writers constantly *select* the elements they wish to use in their texts; but instead of acknowledging this as one of the basic facts of textual creativity, reflectionism posits that the artist's selective creation should be measured against 'real life', thus assuming that the only constraint on the artist's work is his or her perception of the 'real world'. Such a view resolutely refuses to consider textual production as a highly complex, 'over-determined' process with many different and conflicting literary and non-literary determinants (historical, political, social, ideological, institutional, generic, psychological and so on). Instead, writing is seen as a more or less faithful *reproduction* of an external reality to which we all have equal and unbiased access, and which therefore enables us to criticize the author on the grounds that he or she has created an *incorrect* model of the reality we somehow all know. Resolutely empiricist in its approach, this view fails to consider the proposition that the real is not only something we construct, but a controversial construct at that.

Literary works can and should of course be criticized for having selected and shaped their fictional universe according to oppressive and

objectionable ideological assumptions, but that should not be confused with failing to be 'true to life' or with not presenting 'an authentic expression of real experience'. Such an insistent demand for authenticity not only reduces all literature to rather simplistic forms of autobiography, it also finds itself ruling the greater part of world literature out of bounds. What these critics fail to perceive is the fact that though Shakespeare probably never in his life found himself mad and naked on a heath, *King Lear* nevertheless reads 'authentically' enough for most people. It is significant that all the contributors to Cornillon's volume (with the notable exception of Josephine Donovan) adhere to a rather simple form of content analysis when confronted with the literary text. Extreme reflectionism simply cannot accommodate notions of formal and generic constraints on textual production, since to acknowledge such constraints is equivalent to accepting the inherent impossibility of ever achieving a total reproduction of reality in fiction.

The wider question at issue here is clearly the problem of realism as opposed to modernism. Predictably enough, several essays in the volume lash out against modernism, and its somewhat vaguely termed 'formalist' fellow-traveller. The modernist is accused of neglecting the 'exclusions based on class, race and sex' in order to 'take refuge in his formalist concerns, secure in his conviction that other matters are irrelevant' (286). But this is not all:

> Modernism, by contrast, seeks to intensify isolation. It forces the work of art, the artist, the critic, and the audience outside of history. Modernism denies us the possibility of understanding ourselves as *agents* in the material world, for all has been removed to an abstract world of ideas, where interactions can be minimized or emptied of meaning and real consequences. Less than ever are we able to interpret the world – much less change it.
>
> (300–1)[3]

In another essay, feminist criticism is succinctly defined as 'a materialist approach to literature which attempts to do away with the formalist illusion that literature is somehow divorced from reality' (326).[4] The 'formalist' critics referred to in this passage seem to be identifiable as the American New Critics, concerned as they were with the formal

aspects of the literary work at the expense of historical and sociological factors. At this point, however, it is worth noting that though American feminist critics from Kate Millett onwards have consistently argued against the New Critics' ahistoricism, this has not prevented them from uncritically adopting the *aesthetic* ideals of the very same New Critics.

In *Images of Women in Fiction*, the double rejection of 'modernist' literature and 'formalist' criticism highlights the deep realist bias of Anglo-American feminist criticism. An insistence on authenticity and truthful reproduction of the 'real world' as the highest literary values inevitably makes the feminist critic hostile to non-realist forms of writing. There is nevertheless no automatic connection between demands for a full reproduction of the totality of the 'real' and what is known as a 'realist' fiction. At least two famous literary attempts at capturing reality in its totality, *Tristram Shandy* and *Ulysses*, end up by mischievously transgressing traditional realism in the most radical fashion precisely *because* of their doomed attempt to be all-inclusive. And some feminist critics have for instance objected to Joyce's portrayal of Molly Bloom's chamberpot and menstrual cycle (there is no reference to leg-shaving) on the grounds that, in spite of their undeniable realism, these factors contribute precisely to presenting her as a biologically determined, earthbound creature that no woman reader can really *admire*.

In this case the demand for realism clashes with another demand: that for the representation of female role-models in literature. The feminist reader of this period not only wants to see her own experiences mirrored in fiction, but strives to identify with strong, impressive female characters. Cheri Register, in an essay published in 1975, succinctly sums up this demand: 'A literary work should provide *role-models*, instill a positive sense of feminine identity by portraying women who are "self-actualizing, whose identities are not dependent on men" ' (20).[5] This might however clash with the demand for authenticity (quite a few women are 'authentically' weak and unimpressive); on this point Register is unambiguous: 'It is important to note here that although female readers need literary models to emulate, characters should not be idealized beyond plausibility. The demand for authenticity supercedes all other requirements' (21).

Register's choice of words here ('should', 'demand', 'requirements') reflects the strong normative (or prescriptive, as she prefers to call it) aspect of much of this early feminist criticism. The 'Images of Women' critics downgrade literature they find lacking in 'authenticity' and 'real experience' according to their own standards of what counts as 'real'. In case of doubt about the degree of authenticity in a work, Register recommends several tests: 'One obvious check the reader might make on authenticity would be to compare the character's life with the author's' (12), she suggests. One may also use sociological data in order to check up on the social aspects of the author's work, though inner emotions must be subjected to a different form of control:

> While it is useful to compile statistical data on a collection of works from a limited time period to see how accurately they mirror female employment, educational attainment, marital status, birthrate, and the like, it is impossible to measure the authenticity of a single female protagonist's inner turmoil. The final test must be the subjective response of the female reader, who is herself familiar with 'female reality'. Does she recognize aspects of her own experience?
>
> (13)

Though Register hastens to warn us against too simplistic conclusions, since 'female reality is not monolithic, but has many nuances and variations' (13) such a governess mentality (the 'Big-Sister-is-watching-you' syndrome) must be considered one of the perhaps inevitable excesses of a new and rapidly expanding branch of research. In the 1970s, this approach led to a great number of published and unpublished papers dealing with literature from a kind of inverted sociological perspective: fiction was read in order to compare the empirical sociological facts in the literary work (as for instance the number of women working outside the home or doing the dishes) to the corresponding empirical data in the 'real' world during the author's lifetime.

It is easy today to be reproving of this kind of criticism: to take it to task for not recognizing the 'literariness' of literature, for tending towards a dangerous anti-intellectualism, for being excessively naive about the relationship between literature and reality and between

author and text, and for being unduly censorious of the works of women writers who often wrote under ideological conditions that made it impossible for them to fulfil the demands of the feminist critics of early 1970s. Though it is impossible not to deplore the wholesale lack of theoretical (or even literary) awareness of these early feminist critics, their enthusiasm and commitment to the feminist cause are exemplary. For a generation educated within the ahistorical, aestheticizing discourse of New Criticism, the feminists' insistence on the *political* nature of any critical discourse, and their will to take historical and sociological factors into account must have seemed both fresh and exciting; to a large extent those are precisely the qualities present-day feminist critics still strive to preserve.

3

WOMEN WRITING AND WRITING ABOUT WOMEN

TOWARDS A WOMAN-CENTRED PERSPECTIVE

It soon became evident, however, that the simplistic, undiscriminating approach of 'Images of Women' criticism was losing its inspirational force. From about 1975, interest started to focus exclusively on the works of women writers. As early as 1971, Elaine Showalter had advocated the study of women writers as a group:

> Women writers should not be studied as a distinct group on the assumption that they write alike, or even display stylistic resemblances distinctively feminine. But women do have a special history susceptible to analysis, which includes such complex considerations as the economics of their relation to the literary marketplace; the effects of social and political changes in women's status upon individuals, and the implications of stereotypes of the woman writer and restrictions of her artistic autonomy.[1]

Showalter's view gradually gained acceptance. *Images of Women in Fiction* has two male contributors, contains more analyses of male writers than of female writers and often takes a negative attitude to works of

women writers. By 1975, the situation had decisively changed. When in that year Cheryl L. Brown and Karen Olson began to compile their anthology *Feminist Criticism: Essays on Theory, Poetry and Prose* they felt surprised (and upset) that 'what women critics were writing about women's literature was not being published in respectable numbers and not readily accessible to concerned students and teachers' (preface, xiii). To compensate for this bias, their anthology (which remained unpublished until 1978) has no male contributors, and all its essays deal either with theoretical questions or with the work of women writers. This woman-centred approach has now become the dominant trend within Anglo-American feminist criticism.

Before studying more closely the major works of this powerful 'second phase' of feminist research, it should be pointed out that not all books by women critics on women writers are examples of feminist criticism. In the early years of feminist criticism, many non-feminist works enjoyed considerable influence due to the confusion of these categories, as did for example Patricia Beer's *Reader, I Married Him* from 1974. In her preface, the author clearly distances herself from other writings 'on the subject of Women's Lib' (ix), since these all share a serious flaw:

> Whatever they may claim to do, in fact they treat literature as if it were a collection of tracts into which you dip for illustrations of your own polemic, falsifying and omitting as necessary, your argument being of more moment than the other person's work of art. This rhetorical approach seems a pity as novels and plays are so much more illuminating if they are not used as a means to an end, either by writer or reader.
>
> (ix)

Beer's own book is going to be free from this deplorable bias, since 'The novel in particular, without benefit of anyone's argument, can show quite precisely how things are or were' (ix). The author, in other words, trusts precisely the sort of 'value-free' scholarship that feminists denounce as always subservient to existing hierarchies and power structures. Beer also seems convinced that *she* can capture true reality through the novels she is studying, particularly since she herself is free

from feminist leanings. Other sorts of political engagement apparently have no power to distort the true representation of reality Beer seeks, or if they do she does not mention them. *Her* book is not written for fanatics, but for the discerning reader: '[I felt] that the subject might be of interest to readers who, without being necessarily either students of English literature or supporters of Women's Lib, had a concern in the novel and the cause of female emancipation' (ix).

The author is both fascinated and repelled by the 'women's lib' label, clearly wanting to banish it from her book yet at the same time eager to mention it (twice in half a page), since she knows that it is among the supporters of this 'rhetorical approach' that she will find many of her readers. If feminist criticism is a political criticism, sustained by a commitment to combat all forms of patriarchy and sexism, Patricia Beer's book is evidently not a work of feminist criticism. Dominant in her preface (and in her arguments throughout the book) is the desire to exercise a kind of liberal brinkmanship. Positioning herself somewhere in the middle ground 'good liberals' pursue, she is neither a supporter of 'women's lib' nor an opponent of it; on the contrary, she will acknowledge a deep 'concern' both in the novel and in the 'cause of female emancipation'. This kind of 'pseudo-feminist' criticism is of no substantial interest to students of feminist approaches to literature.

In the late 1970s, three major studies appeared on women writers seen as part of a specifically female literary tradition or 'subculture': Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (1976), Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). Taken together, these three books represent the coming-of-age of Anglo-American feminist criticism. Here at last were the long awaited *major* studies of women writers in British and American literary history. Competent and committed, illuminating and inspiring, these works immediately found a deservedly large and enthusiastic audience of women scholars and students. Today it is clear that the works of Moers, Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar have already taken their places among the modern classics of feminist criticism.

All three books strive to define a distinctively female tradition in literature on the grounds that, as Elaine Showalter puts it, 'the female

literary tradition comes from the still-evolving relationships between women writers and their society' (12). For these critics, it is in other words *society*, not *biology*, that shapes women's different literary perception of the world. This basic similarity of approach should not, however, prevent us from noticing the often interesting divergences and differences among these three influential works.

'LITERARY WOMEN'

Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* was the result of a long process of reflection on women and literature, a process that started in 1963, the year in which Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was published, a book which brought Moers to change her views on the need to treat women writers as a separate group. 'At one time', she writes, 'I held the narrow view that separating major writers from the general course of literary history on the basis of sex was futile, but several things have changed my mind' (xv). The reasons for this change of heart were, first, the convincing results of such a separation, then the fact that 'we already practice a segregation of major women writers unknowingly' (xv), and, finally, a deeper understanding of the real nature of women's history. Moers thus mirrors the development of many academic women: from suspecting all attempts at segregating women from the mainstream of historical development as a form of anti-egalitarianism, they came, during the 1960s, to accept the political necessity of viewing women as a distinctive group if the common patriarchal strategy of subsuming women under the general category of 'man', and thereby silencing them, was to be efficiently counteracted.

Literary Women was the first attempt at describing the history of women's writing as a 'rapid and powerful undercurrent' (63) running under or alongside the main male tradition, and, because it mapped a relatively unknown territory for the first time, it received wide acclaim. Tillie Olsen saw *Literary Women* as a 'catalyst, a landmark book [which] authoritatively establishes the scope, depth, variety of literature written by women . . . no one can read it unchanged'.[2] Ellen Moers surely deserved this praise in 1977, but it is indicative of the pace with which feminist criticism has developed that the reader who picks up *Literary Women* in 1985 may not quite share Tillie Olsen's elation. *Literary Women*

remains a well-written and interesting book, though at times somewhat given to sentimental hyperbole, as when Moers enthuses over George Sand and Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

> What positively miraculous beings they were. A magnetism emanates from their life stories, some compelling power which drew the world to them – and all the goods and blessings of the kind that facilitate and ornament the woman's life in letters.
>
> (5)

Nevertheless, the first enthusiasm over the discovery of new terrain is now fading, and the 1985's reader may feel that Ellen Moers's book is not really satisfactory either as literary history or as literary criticism. It is too engrossed in circumstantial details, too unaware of any kind of literary theory to function well as criticism, and far too limited in its conception of history and its relations to literature to be convincing as historiography.

Moers sees history first and foremost as a good story, or as a compelling plot with which to identify and sympathize:

> The main thing to change my mind about a history of literary women has been history itself, the dramatically unfolding, living literary history of the period of my work on this book. Its lesson has been that one must know the history of women to understand the history of literature.
>
> (xvi)

For her, history is a chronicle in the medieval sense: a careful noting down of everything the chronicler feels is relevant to his or her particular perspective. In this sense, the chronicler believes that her version of events, often presented as raw and unstructured 'facts', constitute 'history'. Similarly, Ellen Moers believes that she, as the author of her history, has had no influence on it: 'The literary women themselves, not any doctrine of mine, have done the organizing of the book – *their* concerns, *their* language' (xii). This belief in the possibility of a neutral registration of events sounds strangely out of place in a work that is, after all, avowedly feminist in its approach.

Moers's trust in conventional aesthetic and literary categories, notably her belief that we just *know* which writers are 'great' (the subtitle of *Literary Women* is 'The Great Writers'), avoids confronting the fact that the category of 'greatness' has always been an extremely contentious one for feminists, given that the criteria for 'greatness' militate heavily against the inclusion of women in the literary canon. As an overview of the field of English, American and French writing by women in the period stretching from the late-eighteenth to the twentieth century, *Literary Women*, with its plot summaries, emphasis on personal details and biographical anecdotes serves a useful purpose as a preliminary introduction, but it can hardly now be read as anything but a pioneer work, a stepping-stone for the more mature feminist literary histories that emerged within a year or two of its publication.

'A LITERATURE OF THEIR OWN'

Elaine Showalter disagrees with Moers's emphasis on women's literature as an international movement 'apart from, but hardly subordinate to the mainstream: an undercurrent, rapid and powerful' (quoted in Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, 10), stressing instead, with Germaine Greer, the 'transience of female literary fame' or the fact that women writers celebrated in their own lifetimes seem to vanish without trace from the records of posterity. Showalter comments:

> 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'.
>
> (11–12)

In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter sets out 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' (11). In her efforts to fill in the terrain between the 'literary landmarks' of

the 'Austen peaks, the Brontë cliffs, the Eliot range and the Woolf hills' (vii), she uncovers three major phases of historical development claimed to be common to all literary subcultures:

> 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. An appropriate terminology for women writers is to call these stages, *Feminine, Feminist* and *Female*. (13)

The Feminine period starts with the appearance of male pseudonyms in the 1840s and lasts until the death of George Eliot in 1880; the Feminist phase lasts from 1880 until 1920 and the Female phase starts in 1920 and is still continuing, though it took a new turn in the 1960s with the advent of the women's movement.

This, then, is the general perspective that informs Showalter's guided tour of the female literary landscape in Britain since the 1840s. Her major contribution to literary history in general, and to feminist criticism in particular, is the emphasis she places on the rediscovery of forgotten or neglected women writers. It is in no small part due to Showalter's efforts that so many hitherto unknown women writers are beginning to receive the recognition they deserve; *A Literature of Their Own* is a veritable goldmine of information about the lesser-known literary women of the period. This epochal book displays wide-ranging scholarship and an admirable enthusiasm and respect for its subject. Its flaws must be located elsewhere: in its unstated theoretical assumptions about the relationship between literature and reality and between feminist politics and literary evaluation, questions that already have been dealt with in the context of Showalter's chapter on Virginia Woolf in *A Literature of Their Own*. Since Showalter, as opposed to Moers and Gilbert and Gubar, has also written several articles on the theory of feminist criticism, I have found it unnecessary to elucidate further the theoretical implications of her *practice* of criticism in *A Literature of Their*

Own. Her theoretical perspectives will instead be discussed more fully in chapter 4's discussion of 'Theoretical reflections'.

'THE MADWOMAN IN THE ATTIC'

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's massive volume presents the feminist reader with an impressive set of probing, incisive studies of the major women writers of the nineteenth century: Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, the Brontës (particularly Charlotte), George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson are all exhaustively studied by the two critics. But *The Madwoman in the Attic* is more than 'just' a set of readings. If on the one hand it aims to provide us with a new understanding of the nature of the 'distinctively female literary tradition' (xi) of the nineteenth century, it also aspires to elaborate an ambitious new theory of women's literary creativity. The first substantial section, entitled 'Towards a feminist poetics', presents the authors' efforts to 'provide models for understanding the dynamics of female literary response to male literary assertion and coercion' (xii).

Gilbert and Gubar's enquiry shows that in the nineteenth century (as still today) the dominant patriarchal ideology presents artistic creativity as a fundamentally male quality. The writer 'fathers' his text; in the image of the Divine Creator he becomes the Author – the sole origin and meaning of his work. Gilbert and Gubar then ask the crucial question: 'What if such a proudly masculine cosmic Author is the sole legitimate model for all early authors?' (7). Their answer is that since this is indeed the case under patriarchy, creative women have a rough time coping with the consequences of such a phallocentric myth of creativity:

> Since both patriarchy and its texts subordinate and imprison women, before women can even attempt that pen which is so rigorously kept from them they must escape just those male texts which, defining them as 'Cyphers', deny them the autonomy to formulate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them and kept them from attempting the pen.
>
> (13)

Since creativity is defined as male, it follows that the dominant literary images of femininity are male fantasies too. Women are denied the right to create their own images of femaleness, and instead must seek to conform to the patriarchal standards imposed on them. Gilbert and Gubar clearly demonstrate how in the nineteenth century the 'eternal feminine' was assumed to be a vision of angelic beauty and sweetness: from Dante's Beatrice and Goethe's Gretchen and Makarie to Coventry Patmore's 'Angel in the House', the ideal woman is seen as a passive, docile and above all *selfless* creature. The authors stingingly comment that:

> To be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead. A life that has no story, like the life of Goethe's Makarie, is really a life of death, a death-in-life. The ideal of 'contemplative purity' evokes, finally, both heaven and the grave.
>
> (25)

But behind the angel lurks the monster: the obverse of the male idealization of women is the male fear of femininity. The monster woman is the woman who refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who *has* a story to tell – in short, a woman who rejects the submissive role patriarchy has reserved for her. Gilbert and Gubar mention characters like Shakespeare's Goneril and Regan and Thackeray's Becky Sharp, as well as the traditional array of such 'terrible sorceress-goddesses as the Sphinx, Medusa, Circe, Kali, Delilah, and Salome, all of whom possess duplicitous arts that allow them both to seduce and to steal male generative energy' (34). The monster woman for Gilbert and Gubar is *duplicitous*, precisely because she has something to tell: there is always the possibility that she may choose *not* to tell – or to tell a different story. The duplicitous woman is the one whose consciousness is opaque to man, whose mind will not let itself be penetrated by the phallic probings of masculine thought. Thus Lilith and the Queen in *Snow-White* become paradigmatic instances of the monster woman in the male imagination.

The authors of *The Madwoman in the Attic* then turn to the situation of the woman artist under patriarchy: 'For the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal

definitions that intervene between herself and herself' (17). The dire consequence of this predicament is that the woman writer inevitably comes to suffer from a debilitating anxiety of authorship. If the author is defined as male and she finds herself already defined by him as *his* creature, how can she venture to take up the pen at all? Gilbert and Gubar raise, but do not answer, this question. They do, however, go on to posit what they see as the fundamental problems of feminine literary criticism:

> Since his is the chief voice she hears, does the Queen try to sound like the King, imitating his tone, his inflections, his phrasing, his point of view? Or does she 'talk back' to him in her own vocabulary, her own timbre, insisting on her own viewpoint? We believe these are basic questions feminist literary criticism – both theoretical and practical – must answer, and consequently they are questions to which we shall turn again and again, not only in this chapter but in all our readings of nineteenth-century literary women.
>
> (46)

Gilbert and Gubar's answer to their own question is a complex one. Tracing as they do 'the difficult paths by which nineteenth-century women overcame their "anxiety of authorship", repudiated debilitating patriarchal prescriptions, and recovered or remembered the lost foremothers who could help them find their distinctive female power' (59), they apparently believe that there *is* such a thing as a 'distinctive female power', but that this power, or voice, would have to take a rather roundabout route to express itself through or against the oppressive effects of the dominant patriarchal modes of reading. This, then, is the main thesis of *The Madwoman in the Attic*: women writers have, in Emily Dickinson's words, chosen to 'Tell all the Truth but tell it slant', or as Gilbert and Gubar put it in perhaps the most crucial passage of their book:

> Women from Jane Austen and Mary Shelley to Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson produced literary works that are in some sense palimpsestic, works whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning. Thus these authors managed the difficult task of achieving true female literary

> authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards.
>
> (73)

For Gilbert and Gubar, in other words, the female voice is a duplicitous, but nevertheless true, and truly female voice. The female textual strategy, as they see it, consists in 'assaulting and revising, deconstructing and reconstructing those images of women inherited from male literature, especially . . . the paradigmatic polarities of angel and monster' (76). And this is where the eponymous madwoman makes her entrée into their argument. The madwoman, like Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, is:

> Usually in some sense the *author's* double, an image of her own anxiety and rage. Indeed, much of the poetry and the fiction written by women conjures up this mad creature so that female authors can come to terms with their own uniquely female feelings of fragmentation, their own keen sense of the discrepancies between what they are and what they are supposed to be.
>
> (78)

The 'mad double' or the 'female schizophrenia of authorship' (78) is the common factor in *all* the nineteenth-century novels studied in this book, and Gilbert and Gubar claim that she is an equally crucial figure in twentieth-century fiction by women (78). The figure of the madwoman is then *literally* the answer to the questions raised about female creativity:

> In projecting their anger and dis-ease into dreadful figures, creating dark doubles for themselves and their heroines, women writers are both identifying with and revising the self-definitions patriarchal culture has imposed on them. All the nineteenth-and-twentieth-century literary women who evoke the female monster in their novels and poems alter her meaning by virtue of their own identification with her. For it is usually because she is in some sense imbued with inferiority that the witch-monster-madwoman becomes so crucial an avatar of the writer's own self.
>
> (79)

The figure of the madwoman becomes emblematic of a sophisticated literary strategy that, according to Gilbert and Gubar, gives nineteenth-century female fiction its *revolutionary* edge: 'Parodic, duplicitous, extraordinarily sophisticated, all this female writing is both revisionary and revolutionary, even when it is produced by writers we usually think of as models of angelic resignation' (80). The angel and the monster, the sweet heroine and the raging madwoman, are aspects of the author's self-image, as well as elements of her treacherous anti-patriarchal strategies. Gilbert and Gubar expand this series of binary oppositions by stressing the recurrent use of imagery of confinement and escape, disease and health and of fragmentation and wholeness in the fiction they study. Their often truly inventive and original readings and their complex theory of women's creativity has already inspired many feminist critics to continue the subtle textual work they have begun.[3]

Gilbert and Gubar are theoretically aware. Their own brand of feminist critical theory is seductively sophisticated, particularly when contrasted with the general level of theoretical debate among Anglo-American feminist critics. But what kind of theory are they really advocating? And what are the political implications of their theses? The first troubling aspect of their approach is their insistence on the identity of author and character. Like Kate Millett before them, Gilbert and Gubar repeatedly claim that the character (particularly the madwoman) is the *author's* double, 'an image of her own anxiety and rage' (78), maintaining that it is

> through the violence of the double that the female author enacts her own raging desire to escape male houses and male texts, while at the same time it is through the double's violence that this anxious author articulates for herself the costly destructiveness of anger repressed until it can no longer be contained.
>
> (85)

Their critical approach postulates a *real* woman hidden behind the patriarchal textual facade, and the feminist critic's task is to uncover her truth. In an incisive review of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Mary Jacobus rightly criticizes the authors' 'unstated complicity with the autobiographical "phallacy", whereby male critics hold that women's

writing is somehow closer to their experience than men's, that the female text *is* the author, or at any rate a dramatic extension of her unconscious' (520). Though the two critics avoid oversimplistic conclusions, they nevertheless end up at times in a dangerously reductionist position: under the manifest text, which is nothing but a 'surface design' which 'conceals or obscures deeper, less accessible . . . levels of meaning' (73), lies the *real* truth of the texts.

This is reminiscent of reductionist varieties of psychoanalytic or Marxist criticism, though it is no longer the author's Oedipus complex or relation to the class struggle that counts as the only truth of the text, but her constant, never-changing *feminist rage*. This position, which in less sophisticated guises is perhaps the most recurrent theme of Anglo-American feminist criticism, manages to transform *all* texts written by women into feminist texts, because they may always and without exception be held to embody somehow and somewhere the author's 'female rage' against patriarchal oppression. Thus Gilbert and Gubar's readings of Jane Austen lack the force of their readings of Charlotte Brontë precisely because they persist in defining anger as the *only* positive signal of a feminist consciousness. Austen's gentle irony is lost on them, whereas the explicit rage and moodiness of Charlotte Brontë's texts furnish them with superb grounds for stimulating exegesis.

Quite apart from the reductive aspects of this approach, the insistence on the female author as the instance that provides the only true meaning of the text (that meaning being, in general, the author's anger) actually undermines Gilbert and Gubar's anti-patriarchal stance. Having quoted Edward Said's *Beginnings* with its 'miniature meditation on the word *authority*' (4) as a description of 'both the author and the authority of any literary text' (5), they quote Said's claim that 'the unity or integrity of the text is maintained by a series of genealogical connections: author-text, beginning-middle-end, text-meaning, reader-interpretation, and so on. *Underneath all these is the imagery of succession, of paternity, of hierarchy*' (5).[4] But it seems inconsistent, to say the least, to accept with Said that the traditional view of the relationship between author and text is hierarchical and authoritarian, only to proceed to write a book of over 700 pages that never once questions the authority of the *female* author. For if we are truly to reject the model of the author as God the Father of the text, it is surely not enough to reject the

patriarchal ideology implied in the paternal metaphor. It is equally necessary to reject the *critical practice* it leads to, a critical practice that relies on the author as the transcendental signified of his or her text. For the patriarchal critic, the author is the source, origin and meaning of the text. If we are to undo this patriarchal practice of *authority*, we must take one further step and proclaim with Roland Barthes the death of the author. Barthes's comments on the role of the author are well worth quoting in this context:

> Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyché, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained' – victory to the critic.
>
> ('The death of the Author', 147)

The relevance of Barthes's critique of the author(ity)-centred critic for *The Madwoman in the Attic* should be clear. But what then is the alternative? According to Barthes, it is to accept the *multiplicity* of writing where 'everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*' ('The death of the Author', 147):

> The space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*), by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law.
>
> ('The death of the Author', 147)

Gilbert and Gubar's belief in the true female authorial voice as the essence of all texts written by women masks the problems raised by their theory of patriarchal ideology. For them, as for Kate Millett,

ideology becomes a monolithic unified totality that knows no contradictions; against this a miraculously intact 'femaleness' may pit its strength. If patriarchy generates its own all-pervasive ideological structures, it is difficult to see how women in the nineteenth century could manage to develop or maintain a feminist consciousness untainted by the dominant patriarchal structures. As Mary Jacobus has pointed out, Gilbert and Gubar's emphasis on the deceitful strategies of the woman writer makes her 'evasive at the cost of a freedom which twentieth-century women poets have eagerly sought: the freedom of being read as more than exceptionally articulate victims of a patriarchally engendered plot' ('Review of *The Madwoman in the Attic*', 522).

In other words: how did women manage to write at all, given the relentless patriarchal indoctrination that surrounded them from the moment they were born? Gilbert and Gubar avoid this question, blandly stating as the conclusion of their first chapter that 'Despite the obstacles presented by those twin images of angel and monster, despite the fears of sterility and the anxieties of authorship from which women have suffered, generations of texts *have* been possible for female writers' (44). Indeed, but why? Only a more sophisticated account of the contradictory, fragmentary nature of patriarchal ideology would help Gilbert and Gubar to answer this question. In this context, Cora Kaplan's arguments against Kate Millett are still relevant.[5]

Feminists must be able to account for the paradoxically productive aspects of patriarchal ideology (the moments in which the ideology backfires on itself, as it were) as well as for its obvious oppressive implications if they are to answer the tricky question of how it is that some women manage to counter patriarchal strategies despite the odds stacked against them. In the nineteenth century, for instance, it would seem true to say that bourgeois patriarchy's predilection for liberal humanism as a 'legitimizing ideology' lent ammunition and arguments to the growing bourgeois feminist movement. If one held that the rights of the individual were sacred, it became increasingly difficult to argue that women's rights somehow were not. Just as Mary Wollstonecraft's essay on the rights of woman was made possible by the emancipatory if bourgeois-patriarchal ideas of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*, so John Stuart Mill's essay on the subjection of women was the product of patriarchal liberal humanism. Gilbert and Gubar overlook these

points, referring to Mill only twice *en passant*, and both times as a parallel to Mary Wollstonecraft. Their theory of covert and inexpressed rage as the essence of century 'femaleness' cannot comfortably cope with a 'male' text that *openly* tackles the problem of women's oppression.

This *impasse* in Gilbert and Gubar's work is both accentuated and compounded by their persistent use of the epithet 'female'. It has long been an established practice among most feminists to use 'feminine' (and 'masculine') to represent *social constructs* (patterns of sexuality and behaviour imposed by cultural and social norms), and to reserve 'female' and 'male' for the purely biological aspects of sexual difference. Thus 'feminine' represents nurture and 'female' nature in this usage. 'Femininity' is a cultural construct: one isn't born a woman, one becomes one, as Simone de Beauvoir puts it. Seen in this perspective, patriarchal oppression consists of imposing certain social standards of femininity on all biological women, in order precisely to make us believe that the chosen standards for 'femininity' are *natural*. Thus a woman who refuses to conform can be labelled both *unfeminine* and *unnatural*. It is in the patriarchal interest that these two terms (femininity and femaleness) stay thoroughly confused. Feminists, on the contrary, have to disentangle this confusion, and must therefore always insist that though women undoubtedly are *female*, this in no way guarantees that they will be *feminine*. This is equally true whether one defines femininity in the old patriarchal ways or in a new feminist way.

Gilbert and Gubar's refusal to admit a separation between nature and nurture at the lexical level renders their whole argument obscure. For what *is* this 'female creativity' they are studying? Is it a natural, essential, inborn quality in all women? Is it 'feminine' creativity in the sense of a creativity conforming to certain social standards of female behaviour, or is it a creativity typical of a feminine subject position in the psychoanalytical sense? Gilbert and Gubar seem to hold the first hypothesis, though in a slightly more historicized form: in a given patriarchal society all women (because they are biologically female) will adopt certain strategies to counter patriarchal oppression. These strategies will be 'female' since they will be the same for all women submitted to such conditions. Such an argument relies heavily on the assumption that patriarchal ideology is homogeneous and all-encompassing in its effects. It also gives little scope for an

understanding of how genuinely difficult it is for women to achieve anything like 'full femininity', or of the ways in which women can come to take up a masculine subject position – that is to say, become solid defenders of the patriarchal *status quo*.

In the last chapter of their theoretical preamble ('The parables of the cave'), Gilbert and Gubar discuss Mary Shelley's 'Author's introduction' to *The Last Man* (1826) where the author tells us how she found the scattered leaves of the Sibyl's messages during a visit to her cave.[6] Mary Shelley then decides to spend her life deciphering and transmitting the message of these fragments in a more coherent form. Gilbert and Gubar use this story as a parable of their understanding of the situation of the woman writer under patriarchy:

> This last parable is the story of the woman artist who enters the cavern of her own mind and finds there the scattered leaves not only of her own power but of the tradition which might have generated that power. The body of her precursor's art, and thus the body of her own art lies in pieces around her, dismembered, dis-remembered, disintegrated. How can she remember it and become a member of it, join it and rejoin it, integrate it and in doing so achieve her own integrity, her own selfhood?
>
> (98)

This parable is also a statement of Gilbert and Gubar's feminist aesthetics. The emphasis here is on wholeness – on the *gathering* of the Sibyl's leaves (but nobody asks why the Sibyl of the myth chose to *scatter* her wisdom in the first place): women's writing can only come into existence as a structured and objectified whole. Parallel to the wholeness of the text is the wholeness of the woman's self; the integrated humanist individual is the essence of all creativity. A fragmented conception of self or consciousness would seem to Gilbert and Gubar the same as a sick or dis-eased self. The good text is an organic whole, in spite of the sophisticated apparatus the authors of *The Madwoman in the Attic* bring to bear on the works they study.

But this emphasis on integrity and totality as an ideal for women's writing can be criticized precisely as a patriarchal or – more accurately – a phallic construct. As Luce Irigaray and Jacques Derrida have argued,

patriarchal thought models its criteria for what counts as 'positive' values on the central assumption of the Phallus and the Logos as transcendental signifiers of Western culture.[7] The implications of this are often astonishingly simplistic: anything conceived of as analogous to the so-called 'positive' values of the Phallus counts as good, true or beautiful; anything that is *not* shaped on the pattern of the Phallus is defined as chaotic, fragmented, negative or non-existent. The Phallus is often conceived of as a whole, unitary and simple form, as opposed to the terrifying chaos of the female genitals. Now it can be argued that Gilbert and Gubar's belief in unitary wholes plays directly into the hands of such phallic aesthetic criteria. As we have seen in the case of the feminist reception of Virginia Woolf, a certain feminist preference for realism over modernism can be interpreted in the same way. To this extent, some Anglo-American feminism – and Gilbert and Gubar are no exceptions – is still labouring under the traditional patriarchal aesthetic values of New Criticism.

Gilbert and Gubar's final hope that their book will contribute to recreate a lost 'female' unity bears out this assumption:

> There is a sense in which, for us, this book is a dream of the rising of Christina Rossetti's 'mother country'. And there is a sense in which it is an attempt at reconstructing the Sibyl's leaves, leaves which haunt us with the possibility that if we can piece together their fragments the parts will form a whole that tells the story of the career of a single woman artist, a 'mother of us all', as Gertrude Stein would put it, a woman whom patriarchal poetics dismembered and whom we have tried to remember.
>
> (101)

The passage continues with a rough outline of the story of this single woman artist from Jane Austen and Maria Edgworth to George Eliot and Emily Dickinson. The concern with wholeness, with the woman writer as the *meaning* of the texts studied, is here pressed to its logical conclusion: the desire to write the narrative of a mighty 'Ur-woman'.

From one viewpoint this is a laudable project, since feminists obviously wish to make women speak; but from another viewpoint it carries some dubious political and aesthetic implications. For one thing it

is not an unproblematic project to try to speak *for* the other woman, since this is precisely what the ventriloquism of patriarchy has always done: men have constantly spoken *for* women, or in the name of women. Is it right that women now should take up precisely that masculine position in relation to other women? We might argue, in other words, that Gilbert and Gubar arrogate to themselves the same authorial authority they bestow on all women writers. As for 'telling a story', this can in itself be constructed as an autocratic gesture. As we have seen, Gilbert and Gubar quote Edward Said approvingly when he writes that underneath 'beginning-middle-end' is the 'imagery of succession, of paternity, of hierarchy' (5). But a *story* is precisely that which ever since Aristotle has been the very model of a beginning, a middle and an end. Perhaps it isn't such a good feminist idea to start telling the whole, integrated and unified story of the Great Mother-Writer after all? As Mary Jacobus has remarked:

> This enormously energetic, often witty, shrewd and resourceful book is, it seems to me, limited in the end precisely by its preoccupation with plot; though its arts are not the traditionally female ones of the wicked Queen, they risk in their own way being as reductive. They become a form of tight lacing which immobilizes the play of meaning in the texts whose hidden plots they uncover. What they find there, again and again, is not just 'plot' but 'author', the madwoman in the attic of their title. . . . Like the story of Snow White, this is a plot doomed to repetition; their book (ample partly because it can only repeat) reenacts endlessly the revisionary struggle, unlocking the secrets of the female text again and again with the same key.
>
> ('Review of *The Madwoman in the Attic*', 518–19)

In the end, Jacobus argues, this eternal return to the 'original and originating "story" of women's repression by patriarchy' occurs at the cost of ignoring precisely the political implications of the critics' own stance: 'If culture, writing, and language are inherently repressive, as they may be argued to be, so is interpretation itself; and the question which arises for the feminist critic is, How are they specifically repressive for the woman writer?' ('Review', 520). Jacobus concludes that 'the story between the lines may be feminist criticism's problematic

relation to the patriarchal criticism it sets out to revise' ('Review', 522). At this point, surely, we should ask ourselves if it is not time to revise a feminist aesthetics that seems in these particular respects to lead to the same patriarchal and authoritarian dead end. In other words, it is time for us to confront the fact that the main problem in Anglo-American feminist criticism lies in the radical contradiction it presents between feminist politics and patriarchal aesthetics.

4

THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS

Anglo-American feminist critics have been mostly indifferent or even hostile towards literary theory, which they have often regarded as a hopelessly abstract 'male' activity. This attitude is now beginning to change, and it seems likely that the 1980s will mark the breakthrough of theoretical reflections within the field of feminist criticism. In this section I will examine some of the precursors of this evolution towards a greater degree of feminist reflection on the purpose and function of literature and literary criticism. I have chosen for this purpose to concentrate on the theoretical work of what I take to be three fairly representative Anglo-American feminist critics: Annette Kolodny, Elaine Showalter and Myra Jehlen.

ANNETTE KOLODNY

One of the first texts to break the theoretical silence among feminist critics was Annette Kolodny's 'Some notes on defining a "feminist literary criticism"', first published in the journal *Critical Inquiry* in 1975. The opening passage declares the freshness of Kolodny's approach: 'As yet, no one has formulated any exacting definition of the term "feminist criticism"' (75). After a brief survey of the varieties of feminist criticism, Kolodny turns to her main subject: the study of women's

writing as a separate category. While showing that this kind of criticism is based on the 'assumption that there *is* something unique about women's writing' (76), she is anxious that this approach might lead to over-hasty conclusions about women's nature, or to endless debates over 'the relative merits of nature versus nurture' (76). She is also concerned about what she sees as the 'abiding commitment [in feminist criticism] to discover what, if anything, makes women's writing different from men's' (78); since gender is a *relational* entity, it is clearly impossible to locate a difference of style or content without comparison. 'If we insist on discovering something we can clearly label as a "feminine mode", then we are honor-bound, also, to delineate its counter-part, the "masculine mode"' (78). Kolodny thus advocates a kind of feminist comparativism, much as Myra Jehlen was to do six years later.

In spite of such cautionary warnings, Kolodny nevertheless believes that we may arrive inductively at a number of conclusions about feminine style in literature if we

> begin by treating each author and each separate work by each author as itself unique and individual. Then, slowly, we may over the course of time and much reading discover what kind of things recur and, more important still, *if* things recur.
>
> (79)

This method, however, is somewhat contradictory. For though Kolodny wants us to jettison all preconceived notions about women's writing ('We must . . . begin not with assumptions (acknowledged or not) but with questions' (79)), it is difficult to see how these more or less unconscious preconceptions can be prevented from influencing our reading of each 'unique and individual' author, as well as our selection of features to be isolated and compared. Kolodny herself locates several typical stylistic patterns in female fiction, of which the two most important are 'reflexive perception' and 'inversion'. Reflexive perception occurs when a character 'discover[s] herself or find[s] some part of herself in activities she had not planned or in situations she cannot fully comprehend' (79), and inversion occurs when the 'stereotyped, traditional literary images of women . . . are being turned around in

women's fiction, either for comic purposes, . . . to reveal their hidden reality [or] . . . come to connote their opposites' (80). Inversion thus comes to sound like an early version of Gilbert and Gubar's theory of the subversive strategies located beneath the surface of women's fiction.

Singling out 'the fear of being fixed in false images or trapped in inauthentic roles' as 'the most compelling fear in women's fiction today' (83), Kolodny immediately acknowledges that this is hardly a theme peculiar to women, but insists that the critic's job is to look for the *difference of experience* underlying women's use of such imagery. Feminist critics, according to Kolodny, always seek the *reality* behind the fiction and therefore must 'tread very carefully before asserting that the sometimes grotesque or apparently outré perceptions of reality granted us by women writers and their female characters *are* a distortion of any kind' (84). Her preoccupation with the experience 'behind' the text emerges with particular force in the following passage, dealing as it does with possible differences between male and female use of the same imagery:

> A man's sense of entrapment on the job and a woman's in the home may both finally share the same psychiatric label, but the language of literature, if it is honest, will reveal to us the building blocks, the minute-by-minute experience of what it *feels like* to be trapped in those very different settings.
>
> (85)

In general, Kolodny's programme for feminist criticism remains firmly planted on New Critical ground:

> The overriding task of an intellectually vigorous feminist criticism as I see it, therefore, must be to school itself in rigorous methods for analyzing style and image and then without preconception or preconceived conclusions to apply those methodologies to individual works. Only then will we be able to train our students, and our colleagues, to read women writers properly, with greater appreciation for their individual aims and particular achievements (goals which I am convinced must structure any legitimate literary criticism, regardless of its subject).
>
> (87)

Quite apart from its use of the somewhat masculinist-sounding adjectives 'vigorous' and 'rigorous' to describe the 'right' kind of feminist criticism, this insistence on analysis *without preconception* (as if that were possible) as the basis for *proper* readings of women writers betrays the traditionalism of Kolodny's approach. The rebel feminist who might want to study literature *improperly* (as Kate Millett did), to read 'against the grain' and question the established structures of 'legitimate literary criticism' (why should feminists reject illegitimacy?), can find little foothold in the space opened up by critics like Kolodny, Showalter and Jehlen. Kolodny even recommends that feminist criticism should be 'obliged to separate political ideologies from aesthetic judgments' (89), since, as she puts it, political commitment may make 'dishonest' critics of us.[1] She ends her essay by claiming that the aim of feminist criticism must be 'the reenfranchising of women writers into the mainstream of our academic curriculum through fairer, non sex biased, and more judicious appraisals of their work' (91). Though few are likely to disagree violently with this, it remains an unusually modest framework for the feminist struggle within academia. It is worth pondering whether such reformism may be the inevitable outcome of a feminist analysis based on an unquestioned acceptance of so many aspects of New Critical doctrine.

Five years later, in an article entitled 'Dancing through the minefield: some observations on the theory, practice and politics of a feminist literary criticism', published in *Feminist Studies*, Kolodny returns to some of the questions she raised in 1975, complaining that after a decade energetically developing a whole new field of intellectual enquiry, feminist criticism had still not been granted 'an honored berth on that ongoing intellectual journey which we loosely term in academia, "critical analysis". Instead of being welcomed onto the train . . . we've been forced to negotiate a minefield' (6). According to Kolodny, the academic establishment's hostile reactions to feminist criticism might be 'transformed into a true dialogue' (8) if we made our own methodological and theoretical assumptions *explicit*; and this, precisely, is what she then sets out to do. Arguing that feminist criticism is a fundamentally 'suspicious' approach to literature, Kolodny sees the principal task of the feminist critic as that of examining the validity of our aesthetic judgments: 'What ends do those judgments serve, the

feminist asks; and what conceptions of the world or ideological stances do they (even if unwittingly) help to perpetuate?' (15). This is surely one of her most valuable insights.

The problem arises when she proceeds from this to a wholesale recommendation of *pluralism* as the appropriate feminist stance. Feminist criticism lacks systematic coherence, she argues, and this fact ('the fact of our diversity'), should 'place us securely where, all along, we should have been: camped out, on the far side of the minefield, with the other pluralists and pluralisms' (17). Feminists cannot and indeed should not provide that 'internal consistency as a system' that Kolodny ascribes to psychoanalysis and Marxism. In her discourse, these two theoretical formations come to figure as monolithically oppressive blocks towering over the diversified, anti-authoritarian feminist field. But it is not only untrue that Marxism and psychoanalysis offer such a unified theoretical field; it is also surely doubtful that feminist criticism is *that* diversified.[2] Kolodny acknowledges that feminist politics is the basis for feminist criticism; so that though we may argue over what constitutes proper feminist politics and theory, that debate nevertheless takes place within a feminist political framework, much like debates within contemporary Marxism. Without common political ground, there can simply be no recognizable *feminist* criticism. In this context, Kolodny's 'pluralist' approach risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater:

> Adopting a 'pluralist' label does not mean, however, that we cease to disagree; it means only that we entertain the possibility that different readings, even of the same text, may be differently useful, even illuminating, within different contexts of inquiry.
>
> (18)

But if we wax pluralistic enough to acknowledge the feminist position as just one among many 'useful' approaches, we also implicitly grant the most 'masculinist' of criticism the right of existence: it just *might* be 'useful' in a very different context from ours.

Kolodny's intervention in the theoretical debate pays too little attention to the role of politics in critical theory. When she states, correctly, that 'If feminist criticism calls anything into question, it must be that

dog-eared myth of intellectual neutrality' (21), she still seems not to recognize that even critical theory carries with it its own political implications. Feminist criticism cannot just

> initiate nothing less than a playful pluralism, responsive to the possibilities of multiple critical schools and methods, but captive of none, recognizing that the many tools needed for our analysis will necessarily be largely inherited and only partly of our own making.
>
> (19)

Feminists must surely also conduct a political and theoretical evaluation of the various methods and tools on offer, to make sure that they don't backfire on us.

ELAINE SHOWALTER

Elaine Showalter is rightly acknowledged as one of the most important feminist critics in America. Her theoretical observations are therefore of particular interest to us. I want now to examine two of her articles on feminist literary theory, 'Towards a feminist poetics' (1979) and 'Feminist criticism in the wilderness' (1981).[3]

In the first article, Showalter distinguishes between two forms of feminist criticism. The first type is concerned with woman as reader, which Showalter labels 'feminist critique'. The second type deals with woman as writer, and Showalter calls this 'gynocritics'. 'Feminist critique' deals with works by male authors, and Showalter tells us that this form of criticism is a 'historically grounded inquiry which probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena' (25). This sort of 'suspicious' approach to the literary text seems however to be largely absent from Showalter's second category, since among the primary concerns of 'gynocritics' we find 'the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women' as well as the 'psychodynamics of female creativity' and 'studies of particular writers and works' (25). There is no indication here that the feminist critic concerned with women as writers should bring other than sympathetic, identity-seeking approaches to bear on works written by women. The 'hermeneutics of suspicion', which assumes that the text is not, or not only,

what it pretends to be, and therefore searches for underlying contradictions and conflicts as well as absences and silences in the text, seems to be reserved for texts written by men. The feminist critic, in other words, must realize that the woman-produced text will occupy a totally different status from the 'male' text.

Showalter writes:

> One of the problems of the feminist critique is that it is male-oriented. If we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles women play in literary history, we are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be.
>
> (27)

The implication is not only that the feminist critic should turn to 'gynocritics', the study of women's writings, precisely in order to learn 'what women have felt and experienced', but also that this experience is directly available in the texts written by women. The text, in other words, has disappeared, or become the transparent medium through which 'experience' can be seized. This view of texts as transmitting authentic 'human' experience is, as we have seen, a traditional emphasis of Western patriarchal humanism. In Showalter's case, this humanist position is also tinged by a good portion of empiricism. She rejects theory as a male invention that apparently can only be used on men's texts (27–8). 'Gynocritics' frees itself from pandering to male values and seeks to 'focus . . . on the newly visible world of female culture' (28). This search for the 'muted' female culture can best be carried out by applying anthropological theories to the female author and her work: 'Gynocritics is related to feminist research in history, anthropology, psychology and sociology, all of which have developed hypotheses of a female subculture' (28). The feminist critic, in other words, should attend to historical, anthropological, psychological and sociological aspects of the 'female' text; in short, it would seem, to everything but the text as a signifying process. The only influences Showalter appears to recognize as constitutive of the text are of an empirical, extra-literary sort. This attitude, coupled with her fear of 'male' theory and general appeal to 'human' experience, has the

unfortunate effect of drawing her perilously close to the male critical hierarchy whose patriarchal values she opposes.

In 'Feminist criticism in the wilderness', Showalter tends to repeat the same themes. The new component of this article is a lengthy presentation of what she takes to be the four main directions of present-day feminist criticism: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural criticism. Though her particular division of the field may be queried, it does as a whole reveal that Showalter has come to recognize that necessity of theory. She still employs a division between 'feminist critique' (which she here also calls 'feminist reading') and 'gynocritics'. The feminist critique or reading is, we are told, 'in essence a mode of interpretation'. Showalter continues: 'It is very difficult to propose theoretical coherence in an activity [i.e. interpretation] which by its nature is so eclectic and wide-ranging, although as a critical practice feminist reading has certainly been very influential' (182). In this way she attempts to escape intractable 'male' questions like: What is interpretation? What does it mean to read? What is a text? Showalter once more rejects all meddling with 'male critical theory', since it 'keeps us dependent upon it and retards our progress in solving our own theoretical problems' (183). Her dichotomy between 'male critical theory' and 'our own theoretical problems' is not argued or elaborated in detail, which leaves us to discover for ourselves that while she denounces the 'white fathers', Lacan, Macherey and Engels (183–4), she ends up by extolling as particularly suitable for 'gynocritical' activity the cultural theory developed by Edwin Ardener and Clifford Geertz. Despite a token excuse for this glaring inconsistency ('I don't mean . . . to enthrone Ardener and Geertz as the new white fathers in place of Freud, Lacan and Bloom' (205)), she nevertheless manages by this gesture to bemuse the reader who has followed her so far. Should the aspiring 'gynocritic' use 'male' theory or should she not? Showalter's final answer to this question is frankly evasive, based as it is on a dubious contrast between 'theory' and 'knowledge': 'No theory, however suggestive, can be a substitute for the close and extensive knowledge of women's texts which constitutes our essential subject' (205). But what 'knowledge' is ever uninformed by theoretical assumptions?

And so we are back where we started: the lack of a suitable theory of feminist criticism has become a virtuous necessity, since too much

theoretical study would prevent us from achieving that 'close and extensive knowledge of women's texts' that Showalter herself has so richly displayed in *A Literature of Their Own*. Her fear of the text and its problems is well-justified, since any real engagement with this field of enquiry would lead to the exposure of the fundamental complicity between this empiricist and humanist variety of feminist criticism and the male academic hierarchy it rightly resists.

I will try briefly to show how this complicity works. The humanist believes in literature as an excellent instrument of education: by reading 'great works' the student will become a finer human being. The great author is great because he (occasionally even she) has managed to convey an authentic vision of life; and the role of the reader or critic is to listen respectfully to the voice of the author as it is expressed in the text. The literary canon of 'great literature' ensures that it is this 'representative experience' (one selected by male bourgeois critics) that is transmitted to future generations, rather than those deviant, unrepresentative experiences discoverable in much female, ethnic and working-class writing. Anglo-American feminist criticism has waged war on this self-sufficient canonization of middle-class male values. But they have rarely challenged the very notion of such a canon. Showalter's aim, in effect, is to create a separate canon of women's writing, not to abolish all canons. But a new canon would not be intrinsically less oppressive than the old. The role of the feminist critic is still to sit quietly and listen to her mistress's voice as it expresses authentic female experience. The feminist reader is not granted leave to get up and challenge this female voice; the female text rules as despotically as the old male text. As if in compensation for her obedience, the feminist critic is allowed to launch sceptical critiques of 'male' literature, provided she keeps this critical stance well separate from her concern with women writers. But if texts are seen as signifying processes, and both writing and reading grasped as textual production, it is likely that even texts written by women will be subjected to irreverent scrutiny by feminist critics. And if this were to happen, it is clear that the Showalterian 'gynocritic' would face a painful dilemma, caught between the 'new' feminists with their 'male' theories and the male humanist empiricists with their patriarchal politics.

The limitations of this mode of feminist criticism become

particularly clear when it is confronted with a woman's work that refuses to conform to the humanistic expectations of an authentic, realistic expression of 'human' experience. It is not accidental that Anglo-American feminist criticism has dealt overwhelmingly with fiction written in the great period of realism between 1750 and 1930, with a notable concentration on the Victorian era. Monique Wittig's *Les guérillères* (1969) is an example of an altogether quite different sort of text. This utopian work consists of a series of fragments depicting life in an Amazonian society involved in a war against men. The war is finally won by the women, and peace is celebrated by them and the young men who have been won over to their cause. This fragmented work is interrupted at regular intervals by a different text: a series of women's names printed in capital letters in the middle of a blank page. In addition to the hundreds of names contained in this series, the text also comprises a couple of poems and three large circles representing the vulva, a symbolism that is rejected as a form of inverted sexism at a later stage in the book. Wittig's book offers no individual characters, no psychology and no recognizable 'experience' to be strongly felt by the reader. But it is evident that the work is a deeply feminist one, and as such Anglo-American feminist critics have often tried to engage with it.

Nina Auerbach's *Communities of Women* offers these comments on the women's names intervening in the text:

> The women's names that are ritualistically chanted seem a human joke, since they are attached to no characters we come to know:
>
> DEMONA EPONINA GABRIELA
> FULVIA ALEXANDRA JUSTINE (p. 43)
>
> and so on. Though these names take on their own incantatory life, the empty resonance of their sound is also the death of the real people we used to read novels to meet.
>
> (190–1)

Wittig's text in fact nowhere indicates that the names are spoken by anyone: the 'ritualistic chanting' represents Auerbach's own attempt to attribute the fragmented text to a unitary human voice. When the text

no longer offers an individual grasped as the transcendental origin of language and experience, humanist feminism must lay down its arms. Auerbach therefore wistfully hopes for better days in a human-feminist future: 'Perhaps once women have proved their strength to themselves, it will be possible to return to the individuality of Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, or to the humanly interdependent courtesy of Cranford' (191). If a nostalgic reversion to *Cranford* or *Little Women* is all this brand of criticism can yearn for, the urgent examination of other, more theoretically informed critical practices must surely be a pressing item on the agenda of Anglo-American feminist critics.

MYRA JEHLEN

Myra Jehlen's article 'Archimedes and the paradox of feminist criticism' seems to have voiced central concerns among many American feminists: first published in the summer of 1981, it has already been anthologized twice.[4] Her essay does indeed engage with important issues, devoted as it is to a discussion of the contradiction between what she calls 'appreciative and political readings' (579). Jehlen confronts this fundamental problem not only in feminist criticism, but argues the case for 'radical comparativism' (585) in feminist studies as a whole. According to her, the woman-centered works by Spacks, Moers, Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar suffer from their exclusive focus on the female tradition in literature. Deploring the feminist tendency to create 'an alternative context, a sort of female enclave apart from the universe of masculinist assumptions' (576), Jehlen wants women's studies to become the 'investigation, from women's viewpoint, of everything' (577). This project in itself is both ambitious and energetic. Feminist criticism actually began by examining the dominant male culture (Ellmann, Millett) and there is no reason for women today to reject this aspect of feminist work. But Jehlen takes a step further. In recommending comparison in order to locate 'the difference between women's writing and men's that no study of only women's writing can depict' (584), she points to Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* as being 'all about comparison' (586). But this is clearly untrue: Millett's book, as we have seen, is all about men's writing.

There is a dangerous sliding in Jehlen's argument from a much-needed insistence on the *relational* nature of gender, to a recommendation that feminists return to studying the traditional patriarchal canon of literature. The ambiguity of her argument at this point reflects her conviction that a 'standpoint from which we can see our conceptual universe whole but which nonetheless rests firmly on male ground, is what feminists really need' (576). This ambiguity is caused in no small part by certain highly confusing rhetorical manoeuvres around the image of Archimedes and his fulcrum. Arguing that feminist thinking is a 'radical skepticism' (575) that creates unusual difficulties for its practitioners, Jehlen writes:

> Somewhat like Archimedes, who to lift the earth with his lever required someplace else on which to locate himself and his fulcrum, feminists questioning the presumptive order of both nature and history – and thus proposing to remove the ground from under their own feet – would appear to need an alternative base.
>
> (575–6)

Jehlen alludes here to a central paradox of feminism: given that there is no space *outside* patriarchy from which women can speak, how do we explain the existence of a feminist, anti-patriarchal discourse at all? Jehlen's insistence on the fulcrum image ('What Archimedes really needed was a terrestrial fulcrum' (576)) has the unfortunate effect of implying that such an effort is doomed to failure (a terrestrial fulcrum will *never* shift the earth). Instead of shifting the earth, Jehlen wants to shift feminism back on to 'male ground' – but that is, of course, precisely where feminism, both woman-centred and otherwise, has always been. If there is no space uncontaminated by patriarchy from which women can speak, it follows that we really don't need a fulcrum at all: there is simply nowhere else to go.

In her response to Jehlen, Elaine Showalter opposes her recommendation of a shift towards 'radical comparativism' on the grounds that 'such a shift might mean an abandonment of a feminist enterprise which still frightens us by its audacity' ('Comment on Jehlen', 161). Showalter defends the study of a female tradition in literature as a 'methodological choice rather than a belief', declaring that:

> No woman, we know, is ever cut off from the real male world; but in the world of ideas we can draw boundaries that open up new vistas of thought, that allow us to see a problem in a new way.
>
> (161)

But the study of a female tradition in literature, while not necessarily an attempt to create 'a female enclave', is surely *more* than a methodological choice: it is an urgent *political* necessity. If patriarchy oppresses women *as* women, defining us all as 'feminine' regardless of individual differences, the feminist struggle must both try to undo the patriarchal strategy that makes 'femininity' intrinsic to biological femaleness, and at the same time insist on defending women precisely *as* women. In a patriarchal society that discriminates against women writers because they are *women*, it is easy enough to justify a discussion of them as a separate group. The problem, more urgently, is how to avoid bringing patriarchal notions of aesthetics, history and tradition to bear on the 'female tradition' we have decided to construct. Showalter herself did not avoid these pitfalls in *A Literature of Their Own*, and Jehlen seems hardly to be aware of the problem: her acceptance of the most traditional patriarchal aesthetic categories is, as we shall see, little short of astonishing in a critic who calls herself a feminist.

Jehlen approaches the problem of 'critical appreciation' as opposed to 'political readings' by stating that:

> What makes feminist literary criticism especially contradictory is the peculiar nature of literature as distinct from the objects of either physical or social scientific study. Unlike these, literature is itself already an interpretation that it is the critic's task to decipher. It is certainly not news that the literary work is biased: indeed that is its value. Critical objectivity enters in only at a second level to provide a reliable reading, though even here many have argued that reading too is an exercise in creative interpretation.
>
> (577)

This statement takes for granted that the literary text is an object to be deciphered. But as Roland Barthes has argued: 'Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile' ('The death

of the Author', 147). Jehlen believes that texts are the encoded message of the author's voice: 'critical objectivity' then presumably consists in faithfully reproducing this encoded message in a more accessible form. The status of the author and the text is initially left somewhat unclear in Jehlen's essay. While rightly stating that feminism as the 'philosophy of the Other' has had to reject the Romantic belief that 'to be a great poet was to tell *the* absolute truth, to be the One prophetic voice for all Mankind' (579), she nevertheless goes on to state that the aim of criticism is to 'do justice' to – precisely – the author in order to reproduce 'the distinct vision' of the literary subject. Or in her own words:

> We should begin therefore, by acknowledging the separate wholeness of the literary subject, its distinct vision that need not be ours – what the formalists have told us and told us about: its integrity. We need to acknowledge, also, that to respect that integrity by not asking questions of the text that it does not ask itself, to ask the text what questions to ask, will produce the fullest, richest reading.
>
> (579)

It follows from this that Jehlen must take Kate Millett to task, since her 'intentionally tangential approach violated the terms of Henry Miller's work' (579) and did 'damage to his architecture' (580). For Jehlen, Millett's approach was *improper* and *violent*; her reading becomes the rape of the virginal integrity of Henry Miller's text. It is as if there was a set of objective facts about the work in question that anybody could see if they just tried hard enough and that at all costs must dominate the critic's – *any* critic's – approach. Jehlen's insistence on the *proper* reading to which feminists must submit, or else suffer expulsion into the outer darkness of 'improper' or 'dishonest' critical approaches, here echoes Annette Kolodny's views. Sue Warrick Doederlein is right when she argues that:

> New insights in linguistics and anthropology have surely given the lie to any view of autonomous works of art whose sanctity we must not violate and whose space we only enter (in our abject objectivity) 'to provide a reliable reading'. Feminist critics can (carefully) take certain

> postulates from current masculinist-endorsed hypotheses that will allow us never to apologize for 'misreading' or 'misinterpreting' a text again.
>
> (165–6)

Patrocinio Schweickart, also taking issue with Jehlen on this point, demonstrates the complicity of her theory with the doctrines of New Criticism, and comments:

> It is worth noting that the formalist basis of Jehlen's argument – the notion of the autotelic art object and the concomitant notion that to read literature *qua* literature (rather than, say, as a sociological document) one must stay within the terms intrinsic to (i.e. authorized by) the text – has been seriously contested by structuralism, by deconstruction, and by some reader-response-theories. I am not saying that we should follow critical fashion blindly. My point is simply that, at the very least, the basic tenets of New Criticism have been rendered problematical. We should not take them as axiomatic.
>
> (172)

But if Jehlen's distinction between 'critical appreciation' and 'political reading' is based on a traditionalist definition of the former, from a feminist perspective it is her desire to maintain such an absolute distinction in the first place that raises the more difficult political questions. For the difference between feminist and non-feminist criticism is not, as Jehlen seems to believe, that the former is political and the latter is not, but that the feminist openly declares her politics, whereas the non-feminist may either be unaware of his own value-system or seek to universalize it as 'non-political'. That Jehlen, writing as she does after 15 years of feminist criticism in America, should apparently have no qualms in abandoning one of the most fundamental political insights of former feminist analysis, is particularly bizarre.

Jehlen argues for the separation of politics and aesthetics in an attempt to solve a perennial problem for radical critics: the problem of how to evaluate a work of art that one finds aesthetically valuable but politically distasteful. If she nevertheless ends up arguing herself out of any recognizable feminist position on this problem, it is because she

refuses to see both that aesthetic value judgements are historically relative and also that they are deeply imbricated in political value judgements. An aesthetics recommending organic unity and the harmonic interaction of all parts of the poetic structure for example, is not politically innocent. A feminist might wonder why anybody would want to place such an emphasis on order and integration in the first place, and whether it could have something to do with the social and political ideals of the exponents of such critical theories. It would of course be hopelessly reductive to argue that all aesthetic categories carry *automatic* political overtones. But it is just as reductive to argue that aesthetic structures are always and unchangingly politically neutral, or 'non-political' as Jehlen puts it. The point is, surely, that the same aesthetic device can be politically polyvalent, varying with the historical, political and literary context in which it occurs. Only a non-dialectical mode of thought can argue, as Jehlen does, that Pierre Macherey's view of cultural products as 'relatively autonomous' in relation to the historical and social context in which they are produced is inherently contradictory: to require a simple and uncomplicated answer to the highly complex problem of the relationship between politics and aesthetics is surely the most reductive approach of all.

Jehlen believes that 'ideological criticism' (which to her is identical with 'political' or 'biased' criticism) is reductive. Modern critical theory tells us that *all* readings are in some sense reductive, in that they all impose some kind of closure on the text. If all readings are *also* in some sense political, it will hardly do to maintain the New Critics' binary opposition between reductive political readings on the one hand and rich aesthetic appraisal on the other. If aesthetics raises the question of whether (and how) the text works effectively with an audience, it obviously is bound up with the political: without an aesthetic effect there will be no political effect either. And if feminist politics is about, among other things, 'experience', then it is already related to the aesthetic. It should be clear by now that one of the chief contentions of this book is that feminist criticism is about deconstructing such an opposition between the political and the aesthetic: as a political approach to criticism, feminism must be aware of the politics of aesthetic categories as well as of the implied aesthetics of political approaches to art. This is why Jehlen's views seem to me to undermine

some of the most basic tenets of feminist criticism. If feminism does not revolt against patriarchal notions of cultural criticism as a 'value-free' exercise, it is in imminent danger of losing the last shreds of its political credibility.[5]

Some feminists might wonder why I have said nothing about black or lesbian (or black-lesbian) feminist criticism in America in this survey. The answer is simple: this book purports to deal with the theoretical aspects of feminist criticism. So far, lesbian and/or black feminist criticism have presented exactly the same *methodological* and *theoretical* problems as the rest of Anglo-American feminist criticism. In her valuable survey of lesbian criticism, Bonnie Zimmerman emphasizes the parallels between feminist and lesbian criticism. Lesbian critics are engaged in establishing a lesbian literary tradition, analysing images and stereotypes of lesbians, and problematizing the concept of 'lesbian'. As far as I can judge, they thus encounter precisely the same *theoretical* problems as do 'straight' feminist critics. It is the *contents* of her work that make the lesbian critic's study different, not her method. Instead of focusing on 'women' in literature, the lesbian critic focuses on 'lesbian women', as the black feminist critic will focus on 'black women' in literature.[6]

My point, then, is simply that *in so far as textual theory is concerned* there is no discernible difference between these three fields. This is not to say that black and lesbian criticism have no *political* importance; on the contrary, by highlighting the different situations and often conflicting interests of specific groups of women, these critical approaches force white heterosexual feminists to re-examine their own sometimes totalitarian conception of 'woman' as a homogeneous category. These 'marginal feminisms' ought to prevent white middle-class First-World feminists from defining their own preoccupations as *universal* female (or feminist) problems. In this respect, recent work on Third-World women has much to teach us.[7] As for the complex interactions of class and gender, they too have received little attention among Anglo-American feminist critics.[8]

I have tried in this survey of Anglo-American feminist criticism to throw light on the fundamental affiliations between traditional humanist and patriarchal criticism and recent feminist scholarship. Despite

claims that Anglo-American feminist literary criticism is already generating new methods and analytical procedures, I can find little evidence of such developments.[9] The radically new impact of feminist criticism is to be found not at the level of theory or methodology, but at the level of politics. Feminists have *politicized* existing critical methods and approaches. If feminist criticism has subverted established critical judgements it is because of its radically new emphasis on *sexual politics*. It is on the basis of its political theory (which has already engendered many highly divergent forms of political strategy) that feminist criticism has grown to become a new branch of literary studies. Feminists therefore find themselves in a position roughly similar to that of other radical critics: speaking from their marginalized positions on the outskirts of the academic establishments, they strive to make *explicit* the politics of the so-called 'neutral' or 'objective' works of their colleagues, as well as to act as cultural *critics* in the widest sense of the word. Like socialists, feminists can in a sense afford to be tolerantly pluralistic in their choice of literary methods and theories, precisely because any approach that can be successfully appropriated to their political ends must be welcome.

The key word here is 'successfully': a political evaluation of critical methods and theories is an essential part of the feminist critical enterprise. My reservations about much Anglo-American feminist criticism are thus not primarily that it has remained within the lineage of male-centred humanism but that it has done so without sufficient awareness of the high political costs this entails. The central paradox of Anglo-American feminist criticism is thus that despite its often strong, explicit political engagement, it is *in the end* not quite political enough; not in the sense that it fails to go *far* enough along the political spectrum, but in the sense that its radical analysis of sexual politics still remains entangled with depoliticizing theoretical paradigms. There is nothing surprising in this: all forms of radical thought inevitably remain mortgaged to the very historical categories they seek to transcend. But our understanding of this historically necessary paradox should not lead us complacently to perpetuate patriarchal practices.