

## THE NEW FEMINIST CRITICISM: ESSAYS ON WOMEN, LITERATURE AND THEORY

Edited by Elaine Showalter. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.

Andrea O'Reilly

The recent publication of *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, marks an important date in the history of feminist scholarship. In the last decade there has been an unprecedented proliferation of articles, journals, courses and conferences concerned with feminist literary criticism. Importantly, however, very little of this research was readily available for those students and teachers working in this field. The material remained, for the most part, scattered throughout a library; hidden away in journals or lost because of incorrect cataloguing. Fortunately, the publication of Elaine Showalter's anthology has made this field a little less remote by bringing together, for the first time, those important and controversial articles which gave rise to feminist criticism and continue to inform its development.

*The New Feminist Criticism*, unlike the few anthologies which preceded it, is largely a collection of theoretical, as opposed to critical or interpretive, works that attempt to situate feminist readings in a theoretical framework. Showalter, for example, in her ovarian work "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," argues that the current pluralistic and eclectic approaches which generate revisionist readings must give way to theoretical models which strive to define the specificity of women's writing. Having freed feminist criticism from its exclusively interpretive role, Showalter sets out to determine which school of gynocriticism — biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural — best serves to elucidate the textual inscriptions of femininity. Her survey of the various gynocritical theories and the development of the cultural model, the position she advocates, simultaneously maps out the present terrain of feminist criticism while redefining its contours.

In "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors," Nina Baym also approaches women's writing from a theoretical perspective. Taking as her premise that theories account for either the inclusion or exclusion of texts in a

canon and determine how these texts will be read, Baym demonstrates how the various theories of American fiction result in the virtual absence of women authors in anthologies and course reading lists. Baym argues that because these theories have always equated Americanness, which is quintessentially male, with literary excellence, women authors could write only trivial or minor literature. The following essay, "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History," complements Baym's article by illustrating how in practice these theories caused the critical demise of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Tompkins contends that although Stowe's novel was the most influential book written by an American, it was dismissed by critics because of its failure to conform to the expected myth of Americanness. Like Baym and Tompkins, Lillian S. Robinson addresses the politics of canonicity in her article "Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon." However, Robinson argues that feminists must do more than strive for equality in the canon: they must interrogate the often unacknowledged ideologies and politics which underline canon formation.

As these articles advance feminist literary criticism through theoretical reflection, others broaden its scope of inquiry. The field of Black and Lesbian scholarship, which has largely been ignored by feminist academics, is at last given coverage in Showalter's anthology. The articles by Barbara Smith, Deborah E. McDowell and Bonnie Zimmerman not only make visible the achievements and ambitions of Black and Lesbian criticism, they also, in so doing, force white and straight feminists to re-examine their assumption that "woman" is a homogeneous category. Feminist criticism is further politicized by Rosalind Coward's article which explains the ideology and production of women's texts from a Marxist perspective. Ann Rosalind Jones' essay "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l'Écriture féminine," also suggests a maturation in feminist thought in its familiarity with French feminism, an expression of feminist theory which is radically different from American feminism in its theoretical orientation. This article, therefore, like those concerned with Black and Lesbian criticism, not only introduces American feminists to their French sisters, who before were not given mention or representation in American anthologies, it also, in so doing, brings American

feminism to a new theoretical awareness. This variousness in focus and approach, coupled with the theoretical speculations, establishes, for the first time, an overview of the many and diverse developments in feminist criticism.

In its function as a textbook which surveys feminist criticism and serves to facilitate its integration, Showalter's anthology is unquestionably an important work. This achievement and potential, however, are at times undermined by the anthology's failure to fully represent and promote the more radical factions of current feminist thought.

The choice of contributors, articles and topics reveals a conservatism which makes feminism safe and accessible. The articles selected for *The New Feminist Criticism*, for example, are quite dated: the original publication dates range from 1975 to 1983, with the majority being written to commemorate its publication. Subsequently, because the anthology is made up solely of dated reprints, it fails to represent contemporary feminist criticism.

A conservatism is also apparent in the choice of contributors. The writers who contributed to this anthology are, for the most part, well-known and well-established in their field. Consequently, comprised of mainly canonized feminist scholars, the anthology implies that feminist criticism is monolithic; unified, despite its diverse articulations, by an ideological homogeneity. Importantly, this feminist ideology which informs the anthology is largely a liberal one, derived from the particular status of its own contributors — educated, professional, middle-class women.

Seemingly this exclusiveness, which betrays an elitism and ethnocentrism amongst American feminists, is the result of a larger political process which domesticates feminism so as to make it palatable for a male audience. Throughout the anthology this tendency to tame the radicalism of feminism is made manifest. Carolyn Heilbrun's article, for example, reduces feminism to a "viewpoint" which can serve to revitalize English studies. The radicalism of feminism is further mitigated in Sandra M. Gilbert's article by her appeals to male authority to substantiate her argument and through her reluctance to discuss the revolutionary politics which inform feminist criticism. By divorcing feminist criticism from its political consciousness and commitments, the critics, such as Gilbert and Heilbrun, ultimately compromise the very purpose and principles of feminist criticism.

Subsequently in defusing the revolutionary impact of feminist criticism, this anthology reduces it to a safe and trendy textual practice. Despite its political engagement which calls into question the male bias of literary studies, feminist criticism, as it is conveyed in this anthology, takes as its approach a methodology grounded in patriarchal philosophy and aesthetics. It is this contradiction between feminist politics and patriarchal criticism which compromises the radicalism of "the new feminist criticism."

While this contradiction does not

necessarily invalidate *The New Feminist Criticism*, it does underline the limitations of a feminist criticism built upon a political and theoretical conservatism. In its exclusion of French feminists — Cixous, Kristeva, Irigaray — and more radical American feminists, such as Jardine, Spivak and Johnson, and as a result of the contributors' indifference to, or contempt for, current critical theories, this anthology does not address, let alone resolve, the paradox of its feminist ideology. If this anthology had considered or represented other, more radical theories, it would have achieved

an awareness of the patriarchal practices which inform its feminist theories and readings. The inclusion of marginal and radical feminists would have challenged the anthology's exclusiveness to make it more representative of current feminist thought. However, in its silencing of these women, *The New Feminist Criticism* offers only a class and culturally specific account of feminism. Subsequently, despite its many accomplishments, this anthology fails to fulfill the promise implied in its title, to represent *The New Feminist Criticism*.

## HELENE CIXOUS: WRITING THE FEMININE

Verena Andermatt Conley. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984.

### Jennifer Waelti-Walters

Hélène Cixous is a phenomenon, a fact which makes both the writing of Verena Conley's book and the writing of my review a much more complex matter than either would have been had Cixous been a simple writer. For many readers both in France and elsewhere Cixous is French feminism, and it would not be much of an exaggeration to say that one does get the impression that she has produced half of the total pile of feminist texts single-handedly since 1967. She was one of the founders of the Centre for Research in Women's Studies at the University of Paris VIII and states, "we founded it with the idea that there would be no more professors, no more masters — something that never did materialize, because if one is not the master, the other is of course." Her classes (grouped to make a day-long seminar on Saturdays) have become part of the Paris theatre scene, and it is obvious why when we read Conley's description:

*In the pretext of her classroom, she enacts the release of the name [vulva] from its phantasm in italics above [a quote from LA, p. 110] to its Roman splendour when, at the beginning of every seminar, she unbuckles her belt: a half-cuirass. Her strap frees the body and disintegrates the militant or civic order of the practical world; this is indeed a sensuous militancy that calls her audience to write both with and against the male, to write when the strap undoes the pressures needed to protect and chastize the uterus in the*

*male order. Such are the lives of a modern Cleopatra, a magnanimous neo-Natura who forces the woman in writing to unbuckle the clothing with which she has had to be preserved.*

A writer-actor of this ilk generates various and strong reactions; so it is with Cixous, Conley and me.

### Cixous and me:

It should be made clear before I comment on Verena Conley's book that I have great difficulty in reading Hélène Cixous. I came to her writing with great enthusiasm in 1977 and started reading at the beginning: I enjoyed *Dedans* (1969), read her thesis on Joyce, managed *Les Commencements* (1970), and gave up on *Neutre* (1972), vexed and frustrated. Like Michel Butor (another avid reader of Joyce) Cixous loves abstruse intertextuality; unlike Butor, she gives the reader no signposts at all concerning where to find the source of the cross-references. I was offended, decided that she had picked up Joyce's flashy characteristics with none of the awareness for solid underpinning, and set her aside. Since then I have returned to her from time to time, and still find her modishly unintelligible in criticism and wildly self-indulgent in fiction. Everything she does, Jeanne Hyvrard and Mary Daly do better. I hoped that Conley might make me see the error of my ways.

### Cixous and Conley:

Verena Conley likes Cixous' books and seems to understand them. In her own work she leads the reader through Cixous' works, laying out the "textual strategies," the major concepts and Cixous' shifting relationships with a series of mentors — male theorists

whose writings create a foundation for Cixous' own: Hegel, Freud, Bataille, Rilke, Heidegger, Lacan, Deleuze, Derrida.

Cixous moves from social revolution through linguistic revolution to more meditative "magic" writing in a series of transforming and transformative texts that force apart the rules and habits of language and mix theory and praxis. (In this way her work is similar to that of Nicole Brossard in Québec.) She, herself, claims that she is "the secretary of the unconscious" and writes "all that which inscribes itself, produces itself, develops at night, and which is infinitely larger than I."

She has three main aims which produce a variety of intertwined themes: (1) the writing of sexual/ libidinal drives; (2) the revalorization of women; and (3) the affirmation of life. All require an escape from the "phallogocentric entrapment," that is from the main assumptions of the dominant, male-biased thought processes, symbolisms and discourse of traditional culture and society.

Cixous postulates a notion of bisexual writing, which reveals both the "masculine" and "feminine" impulses in the author and which opens her/him to some understanding of the "external other," i.e. the opposite sex, and pursues it throughout her own books in a continuing search for the language of love and desire.

The revalorization of women is part of the same quest. Women should write to escape cultural and personal repressions, to release our own bodies and express our experience. Cixous claims that hysterics (like Freud's Dora) are the forerunners of the "new women" because only they have opposed phallogocentric desire and thus are in contact with their own drives, their own sense of self and own reality. We must