

**WOMEN'S READING
IN BRITAIN 1750-
1835:
A DANGEROUS
RECREATION**

Jacqueline Pearson. Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press,
1999.

**BY VERONICA
ABBASS**

Jacqueline Pearson's *Women's Reading in Britain 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* is, happily, about women's writing as well as women's reading. *Women's Reading in Britain 1750-1835* is an examination of "the special anxieties surrounding the growth of women's literacy" and the ambivalence of women readers and women writers toward reading and novel reading in particular.

Women's Reading in Britain 1750-1835 is an excellent reference book for students of women's history and women's writing. Pearson's examination of the mid-eighteenth-century, early nineteenth-century attitude toward women's reading also examines the attitude toward women and women's roles in that period. After an introduction that contains a synopsis of literary theory's contribution to the study of "the reader," Pearson begins, not with women readers or writers, but with "the work of major male writers including Fielding, Richardson, Johnson and Byron." This allows for an understanding of how these male writers reacted to and influenced contemporary women readers and writers.

The work of eighteenth-century women writers dominates the remainder of *Women's Reading in Britain 1750-1835*. It seems as if every woman writer and every novel written by a woman is discussed and analysed. If you are familiar with the novels, you are tempted to read them

again. If you are unfamiliar with a writer, Pearson introduces her to you and encourages you to read her novels. Pearson provides us with the reading histories of Laetitia Pilkington, Frances Burney, Elizabeth Carter, and Jane Austen, and provides in-depth discussions of four novels written between 1752 and 1824, where "women's writing as well as reading become significant issues in a battle of the sexes for cultural authority." Of the four, two are available in paperback editions: Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. However, Eaton Stannard Barrett's *The Heroine* or Sarah Green's *Scotch Novel Reading* are only available in the original eighteenth-century editions.

Women's Reading in Britain 1750-1835 is an excellent combination of literary criticism and cultural history. Pearson provides an extensive bibliography of primary and secondary texts, a valuable resource for anyone interested in reading the novels mentioned in the text and consulting the criticism on the period. The conclusions at the end of selected chapters are particularly helpful, especially when *Women's Reading in Britain 1750-1835* is one of many reference books being consulted. Familiarity with mid-eighteenth-century, early nineteenth-century texts is an asset when reading this work; it is not always clear whether it is a fictional character or a real person being discussed. However, her book is, as Pearson promises in the introduction, a focused study of "women's reading, especially, though not exclusively, of and in fiction...."

I was attracted to Jacqueline Pearson's *Women's Reading in Britain 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* because of its title. It promised to provide me with information about eighteenth-century literature and, I hoped, eighteenth-century women writers. I was not disappointed.

STIGMATA

Hélène Cixous. New York:
Routledge, 1998.

BY ELLEN MILLER

Stigmata, an offering of recent essays by Hélène Cixous, presents the reader with a feminist poetics actively pursued through writing that remains connected to the lived body of experience. Cixous's writings can be misunderstood if one of her ways of writing, including theatrical works, operettas, film screenplays, literary criticism, and feminist theory, is divorced from the others. Cixous's multiple voices are not a paradigm of the postmodern tenet that human selves are infinitely realizable. One of the primary themes in *Stigmata* is the retrieval of the body as it is experienced prior to the rift that arises when theory separates our bodies from the fabric of the world. The gestures performed in these essays also sanction separation—between lovers, author and reader, between spaces. These depictions of separation recover a natural, sexed body that has become increasingly suspect after Foucault. Cixous describes the precise link between the body and writing: "It is this hunger for flesh and for tears, our appetite for living, that, at the tip of forsaken fingers, makes a pencil grow."

Cixous's emphasis on life emerges in this collection of essays that has been divided into four fluid sections. In the first section, she forges an intense dialogue between painting "the place of passage" and writing in order to draw the human and non-human near to one another where they can meet beyond the limits of representational thinking. Her phenomenological descriptions are firmly rooted in the hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition that emphasizes our actual engagement with phenomena. She interrogates