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

paintings produced by men, but still exposes truths about women that are lodged within artworks by Rembrandt, da Vinci, and Picasso. Though Cixous has been criticized for her frequent references to male authors and artists, these essays remain faithful to the *écriture féminine* Cixous was first to articulate.

From these meditations on painting, we move forward towards the five essays assembled in "Ringing in the feminine hour." Here, Cixous draws texts close in order that they might not get away. Inevitably though, as Cixous knows, these texts never quite arrive. This is the quality Cixous loves as well as the quintessential quality of love itself Cixous repeats throughout these essays that love is "[T]he letter that never gets there at our time, that gets there at some foreign hour." Lovingly, she reaches down towards the alterity that awaits us from the face of the other: father, book, and in one especially remarkable essay, even the wolf.

In the essay "Love of the wolf," Cixous shows us the strife and love between the lamb and the wolf in a fast-paced journey through the landscapes of Lispector, Tsvetaeva, Pushkin, and Pougatchov and back to our earliest recollections of the children's version of *Little Red Riding Hood*. She evinces the complications involved in love relations, here understood as modeling an economy of the gift rather than the limited economy that encases women in an exchange ruled by a desire for death.

Writing one's own body becomes the theme of the third section. Here, we uncover a way of escaping the problem of essentialism. In order to avoid reductionist explanations of the nature of sexual and gender difference, feminists remain cautious about naming bodies feminine and/or natural. Cixous paints the landscape of her own origins in Algeria and the problems over nationality that play themselves out on the bodies of all citizens. Ultimately, these essays avoid essentialism yet speak about the feminine body, by reserving theory for a time when writing from out of the body has been completed.

Each section of this collection folds in upon the other, holding us close to themes that repeat and speak to each other. In the fourth section, we confront the flesh of the non-human we first encountered in Rembrandt's painting of the slaughtered ox at the start of the book. This section that contains philosophy in its title belies Cixous's earlier description of the philosopher as the once wild man of the agile feet who puts his shoes on. The philosopher stands behind closed doors that used to open onto more texts that were once incapable of capture. Philosophers are text-catchers. That this need not be the case tempts Cixous, whose verbal connection with the non-human, even the most non-human, the divine, allows for the possibility that philosophy might shake off those tight shoes once more and speak of what Cixous calls "the origin of my philosophy." This origin embodies the principle, forgotten by many text-catchers, that the body comes forth first, then writing, and only then, theory.

Stigmata offers scholars in numerous fields—including philosophy, literary criticism, feminist theory, and environmentalism—Cixous's unique meditations on how we can remain open to the other in our current historical situation without performing either theoretical or physical violence upon the body of the other.

SACRIFICED LIVES: KRISTEVA ON WOMEN AND VIOLENCE

Martha J. Reineke. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997.

BY AIDAN BAKER

A man comes home from a hard day at the office. His dog greets him at the door. He kicks it. His wife tells him not to be mean to the dog. So he kicks his wife....

A common enough chain of events: Someone has a "bad day" and his feelings of powerlessness manifest in a display of violence against those physically less powerful. Why this is so is one of the central questions of *Sacrificed Lives*. Not so much the psychological patterns but the cultural and sociological; why is the female body so often the victim of this "substitutionary violence," as Reineke terms it, and why do women "accept" the brunt of this violence?

Reineke invokes Julia Kristeva's notion of sacrificial theory in order to answer this. This is not sacrifice in the classical sense of appeasing the gods, but the idea of sacrifice as a means of maintaining order in society. Women, through their "death-work" (Kristeva's term for bearing and dealing with loss), not only maintain the order of society but are also, paradoxically, it seems, the focus of the violence which keeps chaos at bay. To quote:

> When the maternal body is marked *in* culture as *the* defining border of the intertextual practices that comprise social existence, the reproaches, threats, and fears which characterize this exercise make this body-border a site of contestation.

This is an intriguing and difficult idea and *Sacrificed Lives* is an intriguing and difficult book. Being unfamiliar with Kristeva's work, I initially welcomed Reineke's introduction and contextualization of Kristeva's ideas which make up the first section of the book. However, couched as it was in psychoanalytical terminology and Kristeva's own jargon (such as the aforementioned "death-work'), and written in a very formal style, I found it difficult reading. Moreover—and this applies to