

Feminist theory's development and mobilization of critical positions

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It is worth signaling here that these kinds of criticism tend to recognize that 'Woman' is not a physical being but a 'writing-effect', that 'l'écriture feminine', in Mary Jacobus's phrase, 'asserts not the sexuality of the text but the sexuality of sex'. They do not see writing as specifically 'gendered' but seek to disrupt fixed meaning; they encourage textual free play beyond authorial or critical control; they are anti-humanist, anti-realist and anti-essentialist; and they represent, in effect, a potent form of political, cultural and critical deconstruction. In terms specifically of literary studies, they revalue and reshape (if not explode) literary canons, refuse a unitary or universally accepted body of theory, and overtly politicize the whole domain of discursive practice.

Over the past twenty-five years or so, feminist critical theory has meant, par excellence, contradiction, interchange, debate; indeed, it is based on a series of creative oppositions, of critiques and counter-critiques, and is constantly and innovatively in flux challenging, subverting and expanding not only other (male) theories but its own positions and agenda.

Feminism in general, of course, has a long political history, developing as a substantial force, in America and Britain at least, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Some radical feminists celebrate women's biological attributes as sources of superiority rather than inferiority, while others appeal to the special experience of woman as the source of positive female values in life and in art. Since only women, the argument goes, have undergone those specifically female life-experiences (ovulation, menstruation, parturition),

only they can speak of a woman's life. Further, a woman's experience includes a different perceptual and emotional life; women do not see things in the same ways as men, and have different ideas and feelings about what is important or not important.

Sexual Politics was a pioneering analysis of masculinist historical, social and literary images of women, and in our context here is a formative text in feminist literary criticism. Millett's privileging of literature as a source helped to establish writing, literary studies and criticism as domains especially appropriate for feminism. One crucial factor in the social construction of femininity is the way literary values and conventions have themselves been shaped by men, and women have often struggled to express their own concerns in what may well have been inappropriate forms. In narrative, for instance, the shaping conventions of adventure and romantic pursuit have a 'male' impetus and purposiveness.

Marxism's analysis of class into a women's history of their material and economic oppression, and especially of how the family and women's domestic labor are constructed by and reproduce the sexual division of labor. Like other 'male' forms of history, Marxism had ignored much of women's experience and activity (one of Sheila Rowbotham's most influential books is entitled *Hidden from History*), and Marxist feminism's primary task was to open up the complex relations between gender and the economy.

Showalter's work is its reluctance to engage and contain French theoretical initiatives, for, almost by definition, it is deconstructed by them.

Paradoxically, then, at the point when the gynocritics saw themselves as making women's experience and culture positively visible and empowering, poststructuralist feminism textualizes sexuality and regards the whole project of 'women writing and writing about women' as misconceived. It is to this more radically theoretical analysis of women's difference, opened up by modern psychoanalysis, that we now turn.

Bearing in mind that the fallout from 'French' feminist critical theory is constrained by no national boundary, it is nevertheless the case that this other key strand of the 'second wave' originated in France. Deriving from Simone de Beauvoir's perception of woman as 'the Other' to man, sexuality (together with class and race) is identified as a binary opposition which registers 'difference' between groups of people – differences which are manipulated socially and culturally in ways which cause one group to dominate or oppress another.