The Feminist Reader

Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism

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TO OUR PARENTS

scrambling spatial order, disorienting it, moving furniture, things, and values around, breaking in, emptying structures, turning the selfsame, the proper upside down.

What woman has not stolen? Who has not dreamed, savoured, or done the thing that jams sociality? Who has not dropped a few red herrings, mocked her way around the separating bar, inscribed what makes a difference with her body, punched holes in the system of couples and positions, and with a transgression screwed up whatever is successive, chain-linked, the fence of circumfusion?

A feminine text cannot not be more than subversive: if it writes itself it is in volcanic heaving of the old 'real' property crust. In ceaseless displacement. She must write herself because, when the time comes for her liberation, it is the invention of a *new, insurgent* writing that will allow her to put the breaks and indispensable changes into effect in her history. At first, individually, on two inseparable levels: – woman, writing herself, will go back to this body that has been worse than confiscated, a body replaced with a disturbing stranger, sick or dead, who so often is a bad influence, the cause and place of inhibitions. By censuring the body, breath and speech are censored at the same time.

To write – the act that will 'realise' the un-censored relationship of woman to her sexuality, to her woman-being giving her back access to her own forces; that will return her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her vast bodily territories kept under seal; that will tear her out of the superegoed, over-Mosesed structure where the same position of guilt is always reserved for her (guilty of everything, every time: of having desires, of not having any; of being frigid, of being 'too' hot; of not being both at once; of being too much of a mother and not enough; of nurturing and of not nurturing . . .). Write yourself: your body must make itself heard. Then the huge resources of the unconscious will burst out. Finally the inexhaustible feminine imaginary is going to be deployed. Without gold or black dollars, our naphtha will spread values over the world, un-quoted values that will change the rules of the old game.

8 Feminist, Female, Feminine

Toril Moi

What is the meaning of the word 'feminist' in 'feminist literary criticism'? Over the past decade, feminists have used the terms 'feminist', 'female' and 'feminine' in a multitude of different ways. One of the main points of this essay, however, is to urge that only a clear understanding of the differences between them can show what the crucial political and theoretical issues of contemporary feminist criticism really are. Initially, I will suggest that we distinguish between 'feminism' as a political position, 'femaleness' as a matter of biology and 'femininity' as a set of culturally defined characteristics.

Feminist

The words 'feminist' or 'feminism' are political labels indicating support for the aims of the new women's movement which emerged in the late 1960s. 'Feminist criticism', then, is a specific kind of political discourse: a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism, not simply a concern for gender in literature, at least not if the latter is presented as no more than another interesting critical approach on a par with a concern for sea-imagery or metaphors of war in medieval poetry. It is my view that, provided they are compatible with her politics, a feminist critic can use whichever methods or theories she likes. There are, of course, different political views within the feminist camp. My point here is not to try to unify or totalise these

differences, but simply to insist that recognisable feminist criticism and theory must in some way be relevant to the study of the social, institutional and personal power relations between the sexes: what Kate Millett in her epochal study called *sexual politics*. For Millett, the 'essence of politics is power', and the task of feminist critics and theorists is to expose the way in which male dominance over females (which constitutes her simple and versatile definition of 'patriarchy') constitutes 'perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power'.[1]

In keeping with Millett's approach, feminists have politicised existing critical methods (in much the same sort of way that Marxists have), and it is on this basis 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 marginalised positions on the outskirts of the academic establishment, 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.

A key word here is *appropriation* in the sense of creative *transformation*. Given the feminist insistence on the dominant and all-pervasive nature of patriarchal power so far in history, feminists have to be pluralists: there is no pure feminist or female space from which we can speak. All ideas, including feminist ones, are in this sense 'contaminated' by patriarchal ideology. There is thus no reason to hide the fact that Mary Wollstonecraft was inspired by the male-dominated ideas of the French Revolution, or that Simone de Beauvoir was deeply influenced by Sartre's phallocentric categories when she wrote *The Second Sex*. Nor is it necessary to refuse to recognise John Stuart Mill's efforts to analyse the oppression of women simply because he was a male liberal. The point is not the origins of an idea (no provenance is pure), but the use to which it is put and the effects it can produce. What matters is therefore not so much whether a particular theory was formulated by a man or a woman, but whether its effects can be characterised as sexist or feminist in a given situation.

In this specific context, then, the fact that there are no purely female intellectual traditions available to us is not as depressing as it might have been. What is important is whether we can produce a recognisable feminist impact through our specific use (appropriation) of available material. This emphasis on the productive transformation of other thinkers' material in a way simply restates what creative thinkers and writers have always done: nobody thinks well in a vacuum, nor does anybody ever live in one. Feminists nevertheless often accuse male intellectuals of 'stealing' women's ideas, as for instance the title of one of Dale Spender's many books, *Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them*, makes clear.[2] But can we accuse men of 'stealing' women's ideas if we at the same time argue vociferously for the feminist appropriation of *everybody*'s ideas? Spender's book examines cases of clear intellectual dishonesty: men presenting women's ideas as their own without any kind of acknowledgement of their borrowing, which must be said to constitute an obvious example of the widespread patriarchal effort to silence women. Feminists appropriating traditional thought explicitly discuss the assumptions and strategies of the material they want to use or transform: there can be no question of recommending *silent* appropriation of other theories. (Many feminists object to the idea that thoughts should be considered anybody's personal property. Although I agree with this view, it remains important to criticise the presentation of impulses received from others *as one's own*: this practice can only reinforce the ideology of intellectual property.) As politically motivated critics, feminists will try to make the political context and implications of their work explicit, precisely in order to counter the tacit acceptance of patriarchal power politics which is so often presented as intellectual 'neutrality' or 'objectivity'.

The problem with Spender's approach is that it casts women as eternal victims of male ploys. While it is true that many women have been victimised intellectually, emotionally and physically by men, it is also true that some have managed efficiently to counter male power. Stressing our right, aggressively if necessary, to appropriate other people's ideas for our

own political purposes, we may avoid a defeatist analysis of the situation of intellectually and culturally active women. As examples of this task of cultural transformation, we can point to the many women who have started the massive task of turning Freudian psychoanalysis into a source of truly feminist analyses of sexual difference and the construction of gender in patriarchal society, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray who have put the philosophy of Jacques Derrida to illuminating feminist use, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar who have thoroughly rewritten the literary theory of Harold Bloom.[3]

Female

If feminist criticism is characterised by its *political* commitment to the struggle against all forms of patriarchy and sexism, it follows that the very fact of being *female* does not necessarily guarantee a feminist approach. As a political discourse feminist criticism takes its *raison d'être* from outside criticism itself. It is a truism, but it still needs to be said that not all books written by women on women writers exemplify anti-patriarchal commitment. This is particularly true for many early (pre-1960s) works on women writers, which often indulge in precisely the kind of patriarchal stereotyping feminists want to combat. A female tradition in literature or criticism is not necessarily a feminist one.

In her incisive essay 'Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?' Rosalind Coward discusses the general confusion of *feminist* with *female* writing, both within the women's movement and in publishing and the other media. 'It is just not possible to say that woman-centred writings have any necessary relationship to feminism', Coward argues. 'The Mills and Boon romantic novels are written by, read by, marketed for, and are all about women. Yet nothing could be further from the aims of feminism than these fantasies based on sexual, racial, and class submission which so frequently characterize these novels'.[4] Behind the frequent confusion of feminist with female texts is a complex web of assumptions. It is, for example, often assumed that the very fact of describing experience typical of women is a feminist act. On the one

hand this is obviously true: since patriarchy has always tried to silence and repress women and women's experience, rendering them visible is clearly an important anti-patriarchal strategy. On the other hand, however, women's experience can be made visible in alienating, deluded or degrading ways: the Mills and Boon accounts of female love or Anita Bryant's praise of heterosexual love and motherhood are not *per se* emancipatory reading for women. The mistaken belief in *experience* as the essence of feminist politics, stems from the early emphasis on consciousness-raising (c-r) as the main political base of the new women's movement. The point is that consciousness-raising, founded as it is on the notion of 'representative experience' cannot in itself ground a politics, since any experience is open to conflicting political interpretations.[5] It would seem that many feminists today have realised this. Rosalind Coward even argues that c-r groups are no longer central to the women's movement: 'For the most part, consciousness-raising no longer forms the heart of feminism; small groups which do still have a central place in feminist politics are now often either campaigning groups or study groups'.[6]

To believe that common female experience in itself gives rise to a feminist analysis of women's situation, is to be at once politically naive and theoretically unaware. The fact of having the same experience as somebody else in no way guarantees a common political front: the millions of soldiers who suffered in the trenches during the First World War did not all turn pacifist – or socialist or militarist – afterwards. Unfortunately, the experience of childbirth or period pains is neither common to all women nor particularly apt to inspire a deep desire for political liberation: if it did, women would long since have changed the face of the earth. Although crucially shaped by its anti-patriarchal emphasis on female experience, feminism as a political theory cannot be reduced to a reflection or a product of that experience. The Marxist view of the necessary dialectical relationship between theory and practice also applies to the relationship between female experience and feminist politics.

The fact that so many feminist critics have chosen to write about female authors, then, is a crucial political choice, but

not a definition of feminist criticism. It is not its object, but its political perspective which gives feminist criticism its (relative) unity. Feminist critics, then, may well deal with books written by men, as they have done from the late 60s to the present day. Kate Millett, in her pioneering *Sexual Politics*, reveals the fundamental sexism of male writers such as Norman Mailer, Henry Miller and D. H. Lawrence; Mary Ellmann, in *Thinking About Women* wittily discusses the sexist habits of male literary critics, and Penny Boumelha analyses the sexual ideology of Thomas Hardy in her *Thomas Hardy and Women*, just to mention a few.[7]

A final problem raised by the distinction between feminist and female is the question of whether men can be feminists or feminist critics. If feminists do not have to work exclusively on female authors, perhaps they do not need to *be* females, either? In principle, the answer to this question is surely yes: men can be feminists – but they can't be women, just as whites can be anti-racist, but not black. Under patriarchy men will always speak from a different *position* than women, and their political strategies must take this into account. In practice, therefore, the would-be male feminist critic ought to ask himself whether he as a male is really doing feminism a service in our present situation by muscling in on the one cultural and intellectual space women have created for themselves within 'his' male-dominated discipline.

Feminine

If the confusion of *female* with *feminist* is fraught with political pitfalls, this is no less true of the consequences of the collapse of *feminine* into *female*. Among many feminists it has long been established usage to make 'feminine' (and 'masculine') 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. Patriarchy, in other words, wants us to believe that there is such a thing as an essence of femaleness, called femininity. 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. Essentialism (the belief in a given female nature) in the end always plays into the hands of those who want women to conform to predefined patterns of femininity. In this context *biologism* is the belief that such an essence is biologically given. It is not less *essentialist*, however, to hold that there is a historically or socially given female essence.

But if, as suggested, we define *feminism* as a political position and *femaleness* as a matter of biology, we are still confronted with the problem of how to define *femininity*. 'A set of culturally defined characteristics' or a 'cultural construct' may sound irritatingly vague to many. It would seem that any content could be poured into this container; it does not read like a 'proper' definition. The question is, however, whether it is desirable for feminists to try to fix the meaning of femininity at all. Patriarchy has developed a whole series of 'feminine' characteristics (sweetness, modesty, subservience, humility, etc.). Should feminists then really try to develop another set of 'feminine' virtues, however desirable? And even if we did want to define femininity normatively, would it then not just become a part of the metaphysical binary oppositions Hélène Cixous rightly criticises? There is also a danger of turning a positive, feminist definition of femininity into a definition of femaleness, and thereby falling back into another patriarchal trap. Gratifying though it is to be told that women really are strong, integrated, peace-loving, nurturing and creative beings, this plethora of new virtues is no less essentialist than the old ones, and no less oppressive to all those women who

do not want to play the role of Earth Mother. It is after all patriarchy, not feminism, which has always believed in a true female/feminine nature: the biologism and essentialism which lurk behind the desire to bestow feminine virtues on all female bodies necessarily plays into the hands of the patriarchs.

The Deconstruction of Binary Oppositions

So far, we have looked at the terms female – feminine – feminist in relation only to each other. It is, however, equally important to be aware of the political and theoretical implications of assuming that they enter into automatic and static binary oppositions, such as female/male or feminine/masculine.

The case of *feminist* or *feminism*, however, would seem to be somewhat different. The relationship between words like feminism, sexism and patriarchy would seem to be more complex than in the case of female/male or feminine/masculine, possibly because of the political nature of these terms. I am therefore not assuming that the following discussion of the ideology of binary oppositions necessarily goes for sexist/feminist or patriarchal/feminist as well, since there seems to be no automatic homology with 'pairs' such as male/female or masculine/feminine.

Hélène Cixous has contributed a valuable discussion of the consequences of what she calls 'death-dealing binary thought'. Under the heading 'Where is she?', Cixous lines up a list of binary oppositions (see pp. 101–2 above). Corresponding as they do to the underlying opposition Man/Woman, these binary oppositions are heavily imbricated in the patriarchal value system: each opposition can be analysed as a hierarchy where the 'feminine' side is always seen as the negative, powerless instance. The biological opposition male/female, in other words, is used to construct a series of negative 'feminine' values which then are imposed on and confused with the 'female'. For Cixous, who at this point is heavily indebted to Jacques Derrida's work, Western philosophy and literary thought is and has always been caught up in this endless series of hierarchical binary oppositions, which always in the

end come back to the fundamental 'couple' of male/female. Her examples show that it does not much matter which 'couple' one chooses to highlight: the hidden male/female opposition with its inevitable positive/negative evaluation can always be traced as the underlying paradigm.

In a typical move, Cixous then goes on to locate *death* at work in this kind of thought. For one of the terms to acquire meaning, she claims, it must destroy the other. The 'couple' cannot be left intact: it becomes a general battlefield where the struggle for signifying supremacy is forever re-enacted. In the end, victory is equated with activity and defeat with passivity; under patriarchy, the male is always the victor. Cixous passionately denounces such an equation of femininity with passivity and death as leaving no positive space for woman: 'Either woman is passive or she does not exist'.[8] Broadly inspired by the thinking and intellectual strategies of Jacques Derrida, her whole theoretical project can in one sense be summed up as the effort to undo this logocentric ideology: to proclaim woman as the source of life, power and energy and to hail the advent of a new, feminine language which ceaselessly subverts these patriarchal binary schemes where logocentrism colludes with phallocentrism in an effort to oppress and silence women. (*Phallocentrism* denotes a system that privileges the phallus as the symbol or source of power. The conjuncture of logocentrism and phallocentrism is often called, after Derrida, *phallogocentrism*.) This project is itself fraught with dangers: although more aware of the problems involved, Cixous often finds herself in great trouble when she tries to distinguish her concept of a *feminine* writing from the idea of a *female* writing. After an heroic struggle against the dangers of biologism, it is probably fair to say that Cixous's theories of an *écriture féminine* in the end fall back into a form of biological essentialism.[9]

But Cixous's 'deconstruction' of the feminine/masculine opposition remains valuable for feminists. If her analysis is correct, for a feminist to continue advocating binary thought, implicitly or explicitly, would seem to be tantamount to remaining inside patriarchal metaphysics. The idea of a unified *female* opposition pitting itself against a *male* front would thus not be a possible feminist strategy for the defeat

of patriarchy: on the contrary, it would shore up the very system it seeks to undo. Against any binary scheme of thought, Cixous sets multiple, heterogeneous *difference*. In so doing, she is deeply influenced by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida's concept of difference, or, more correctly, *differance*. For Derrida, meaning (signification) is not produced in the static closure of the binary opposition. Rather it is achieved through the 'free play of the signifier'.[10] To enclose maleness and femaleness in an exclusive opposition to each other, Cixous argues, is thus precisely to force them to enter into the death-dealing power struggle she locates within the binary opposition. Following this logic, the feminist task *par excellence* becomes the deconstruction of patriarchal metaphysics (the belief in an inherent, present meaning in the sign). If, as Derrida has argued, we are still living under the reign of metaphysics, it is impossible to produce new concepts untainted by the metaphysics of presence. To propose a new definition of femininity is therefore necessarily to fall back into the metaphysical trap.

Femininity as Marginality

But doesn't all this theory leave feminists in a kind of double impasse? Is it really possible to remain in the realm of deconstruction when Derrida himself acknowledges that we still live in a 'metaphysical' intellectual space? And how can we continue our political struggle if we first have to deconstruct our own basic assumption of an opposition between male power and female submission? One way of answering these questions is to look at the French-Bulgarian linguist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's considerations on the question of femininity. Flatly refusing to define 'femininity', she prefers to see it as a *position*. If femininity then can be said to have a definition at all in Kristevan terms, it is simply as 'that which is marginalised by the patriarchal symbolic order'. This relational 'definition' is as shifting as the various forms of patriarchy itself, and allows her to argue that men can also be constructed as marginal to the symbolic order, as her

analyses of male avant-garde artists (Joyce, Céline, Artaud, Mallarmé, Lautréamont) have shown.[11]

Kristeva's emphasis on femininity as a patriarchal construct enables feminists to counter all forms of biologistic attacks from the defenders of phallocentrism. To posit all women as necessarily feminine and all men as necessarily masculine, is precisely the move which enables the patriarchal powers to define, not femininity, but all *women* as marginal to the symbolic order and to society. If, as Cixous has shown, femininity is defined as lack, negativity, absence of meaning, irrationality, chaos, darkness – in short, as non-Being – Kristeva's emphasis on marginality allows us to view this repression of the feminine in terms of *positionality* rather than of essences. What is perceived as marginal at any given time depends on the position one occupies. A brief example will illustrate this shift from essence to position: if patriarchy sees women as occupying a marginal position within the symbolic order, then it can construe them as the *limit* or border-line of that order. From a phallocentric point of view, women will then come to represent the necessary frontier between man and chaos, but because of their very marginality they will also always seem to recede into and merge with the chaos of the outside. Women seen as the limit of the symbolic order will in other words share in the disconcerting properties of *all* frontiers: they will be neither inside nor outside, neither known nor unknown. It is this position which has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos, to view them as Lilith or the Whore of Babylon, and sometimes to elevate them as the representatives of a higher and purer nature, to venerate them as Virgins and Mothers of God. In the first instance the borderline is seen as part of the chaotic wilderness outside, and in the second it is seen as an inherent part of the inside: the part which protects and shields the symbolic order from the imaginary chaos. Needless to say, neither position corresponds to any essential truth of woman, much as the patriarchal powers would like us to believe that they did.[12]

Such a positional perspective on the meaning of femininity would seem to be the only way of escaping the dangers of biologism (conflation with femaleness). But it does not answer

our basic political questions. For if we now have deconstructed the *female* out of existence, it would seem that the very foundations of the feminist struggle have disappeared. In her article 'Women's Time', Kristeva advocates a deconstructive approach to sexual difference. The feminist struggle, she argues, must be seen historically and politically as a three-tiered one, which can be schematically summarised as follows:

(1) Women demand equal access to the symbolic order. Liberal feminism. Equality.
(2) Women reject the male symbolic order in the name difference. Radical feminism. Femininity extolled.
(3) Women reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical. (This is Kristeva's own position.)

The third position is one that has deconstructed the opposition between masculinity and femininity, and therefore necessarily challenges the very notion of identity. Kristeva writes:

> In this third attitude, which I strongly advocate – which I imagine? – the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition between two rival entities may be understood as belonging to *metaphysics*. What can 'identity', even 'sexual identity', mean in a new theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged? (see below, pp. 214–15)

The relationship between these three positions requires some comments. Elsewhere in her article Kristeva clearly states that she sees them as simultaneous and non-exclusive positions in contemporary feminism, rather than as a feminist version of Hegel's philosophy of history. To advocate position 3 as exclusive of the first two is to lose touch with the political reality of feminism. We still need to claim our place in human society as equals, not as subordinate members, and we still need to emphasise that difference between male and female experience of the world. But that difference is shaped by the patriarchal structures feminists are opposing; and to remain faithful to it, is to play the patriarchal game. Nevertheless, as

long as patriarchy is dominant, it still remains *politically* essential for feminists to defend women *as* women in order to counteract the patriarchal oppression that precisely despises women *as* women. But an 'undeconstructed' form of 'stage 2' feminism, unaware of the metaphysical nature of gender identities, runs the risk of becoming an inverted form of sexism. It does so by uncritically taking over the very metaphysical categories set up by patriarchy in order to keep women in their places, despite attempts to attach new feminist values to these old categories. An adoption of Kristeva's 'deconstructed' form of feminism therefore in one sense leaves everything as it was – our positions in the political struggle have not changed; but in another sense, it radically transforms our awareness of the nature of that struggle. A feminist appropriation of deconstruction is therefore both possible and politically productive as long as it does not lead us to repress the necessity of incorporating Kristeva's two first stages into our perspective.

Female Criticism and Feminine Theory

Against this background, the field of feminist criticism and theory today could helpfully be divided into two main categories: 'female' criticism and 'feminine' theory. 'Female' criticism, which *per se* only means criticism which in some way focuses on women, may then be analysed according to whether it is feminist or not, whether it takes female to mean feminist, or whether it conflates female with feminine. The apolitical study of female authors is obviously not in itself feminist: it could very well just be an approach which reduces women to the status of interesting scientific objects on a par with insects or nuclear particles. It is nevertheless important to stress that in a male-dominated context an interest in women writers must objectively be considered a support for the feminist project of making women visible. This would of course not be true for obviously sexist research on women. It is in other words possible to be a 'female' critic without necessarily being a feminist one.

The great majority of American feminist critics nevertheless

write from an explicitly feminist position. The emphasis in the United States has been on 'gynocritics', or the study of women writers. Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* are the most accomplished examples of this genre within feminist criticism.[13] In the context of this essay, Gilbert and Gubar's monumental study furnishes an instructive example of the consequences of the confusion not only of femaleness with femininity, but also of this amalgamated femaleness/femininity with feminism. In their investigation of typical motifs and patterns among nineteenth-century women writers, they persistently use the adjective *female*, discussing for instance the 'female tradition in literature', 'female writing', 'female creativity' or 'female anger', just to mention a few. One of their central arguments is that nineteenth-century women writers chose to express their own female anger in a series of duplicitous textual strategies whereby both 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. This is an extremely seductive theory, and strikingly productive, for instance when applied to the works of Charlotte Brontë, who of course created the eponymous madwoman in the first place. But if we unravel the probable meanings of the word *female* in Gilbert and Gubar's text, we find that this theory of 'female creativity' rests on the assumption that *female* authors always experience anti-patriarchal rage in their hearts and that this *feminist* anger will create a typically *feminine* pattern of writing, where a shrewd strategy of disguise is used to make the message from the marginalised group acceptable to the patriarchal powers. This *feminine* pattern, however, is not available to male authors, but common to all *female* writers. The patriarchal strategy of collapsing the feminine into the female can here be seen at work: the *écriture féminine* emerging from this kind of argument is more than tinged with biologism. Gilbert and Gubar's account homogenises all female creative utterances into *feminist* self-expression: a strategy which singularly fails to account for 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.

'Feminine' theory in its simplest definition would mean theories concerned with the construction of femininity. From a feminist perspective the problem with this kind of thought is that it is particularly prone to attacks of biologism and often unwittingly turns into theories about female essences instead. At the same time, even the most determinedly 'constructionist' of theories may very well not be feminist ones. The works of Sigmund Freud for example offer a splendid illustration of a theory formation which, while in no way feminist, provides a crucial foundation for a non-essentialist analysis of sexual difference. The alternative, a theory of essential female qualities, would, as we have seen, simply play the patriarchal game. Although psychoanalysis still needs to be creatively transformed for feminist purposes, the fact remains that feminism needs a non-essentialist theory of human sexuality and desire in order to understand the power relations between the sexes.

Much French feminist theory, as well as various feminist rereadings of psychoanalysis may be considered 'feminine theories' in this sense. But there is a paradox involved in my arguments here. Many French feminists, for example, would strongly take issue with my attempt to define 'femininity' at all. If they reject labels and names and 'isms' in particular – even 'feminism' and 'sexism' – it is because they see such labelling activity as betraying a phallogocentric drive to stabilise, organise and rationalise our conceptual universe. They argue that it is masculine rationality that has always privileged reason, order, unity and lucidity, and that it has done so by silencing and excluding the irrationality, chaos and fragmentation that has come to represent femininity. My own view is that such conceptual terms are at once politically crucial and ultimately metaphysical; it is necessary at once to deconstruct the opposition between traditionally 'masculine' and traditionally 'feminine' values *and* to confront the full political force and reality of such categories. We must aim for a society in which we have ceased to categorise logic, conceptualisation and rationality as 'masculine', not for one from which these virtues have been expelled altogether as 'unfeminine'.

To sum up this presentation of feminist literary theory

today, we can now define as *female*, writing by women, bearing in mind that this label does not say anything at all about the nature of that writing; as *feminist*, writing which takes a discernible anti-patriarchal and anti-sexist position; and as *feminine*, writing which seems to be marginalised (repressed, silenced) by the ruling social/linguistic order. The latter does not (*pace* Kristeva) entail any specific *political* position (no clear-cut feminism), although it does not exclude it either. Thus some feminists, such as Hélène Cixous, have tried to produce 'feminine' writing, and others (Simone de Beauvoir) have not. The problem with the 'feminine' label so far has been its tendency to privilege and/or overlap with existing forms of literary modernism and avant-gardism. This, I think, is only one possible way of being marginal in relation to the dominant order (in this case in relation to the traditional representational or realist forms of writing). 'Marginality' cannot or should not *only* be a matter of form.

Perhaps the most important point in all this is to realise that these three 'labels' are not essences. They are categories we as readers or critics operate. *We* produce texts as marginal by situating them in relation to other, dominant structures; we choose to read early texts by women as pre-feminist work; we decide to work on 'female' texts. The definitions proposed here are intended to be open for debate, not to put an end to it, although they are also supposed to say something about the terrain on which the debate might fruitfully be staged: politics, biology and marginality would seem to be key issues here. There is not, unfortunately, such a thing as an intrinsically feminist text: given the right historical and social context, all texts can be recuperated by the ruling powers – or appropriated by the feminist opposition. As Julia Kristeva might have argued, all forms of language are sites of struggle. As feminist critics our task is to prevent the patriarchs from getting away with their habitual trick of silencing the opposition. It is up to us to make the struggle over the meaning of the sign – the meaning of the text – an explicit and inevitable item on the cultural agenda.

9 Women and Madness: the Critical Phallacy

Shoshana Felman

Silence gives the proper grace to women.
Sophocles, *Ajax*

Dalila: In argument with men a woman ever
Goes by the worse, whatever be her cause.
Samson: For want of words, no doubt, or
lack of breath!
Milton, *Samson Agonistes*

1 Woman as Madness

Is it by chance that hysteria (significantly derived, as is well known, from the Greek word for 'uterus') was originally conceived as an exclusively *female* complaint, as the lot and *prerogative* of women? And is it by chance that even today, between women and madness, sociological statistics establish a privileged relation and a definite correlation? 'Women,' writes Phyllis Chesler, in her book *Women and Madness*, 'Women more than men, and in greater numbers than their existence in the general population would predict, are involved in "careers" as psychiatric patients.'[1] How is this sociological fact to be analysed and interpreted? What is the nature of the relationship it implies between women and madness? Supported by extensive documentation, Phyllis Chesler proposes a confrontation between objective data and the subjective testimony of women: laced with the voices of women speaking in the first person – literary excerpts from the novels and

Thus, feminine writing is identified as the liberatory act which resists patriarchal definitions of femininity as lack or negativity, and which will 'change the rules of the old game' by celebrating the affirmative power of a feminine sexual/textual aesthetic of difference. Although this aesthetic presently belongs to women writers, with the exception of some homosexual male writers such as Jean Genêt, or modernists like James Joyce, the essay envisages a utopian future in which the plurality and difference of each person's possible sexual/textual identities will be released.

Notes

1. Cixous, 'Les Comtes de Hoffmann' ('Tales of Hoffmann'), in *Prénoms de personne* (*Nobody's First Names*) (Paris, 1974), p. 112ff.
2. See 'Bisexualité et difference des sexes', *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, 7 (Spring 1973).

8 Toril Moi, 'Feminist, Female, Feminine' (Edited extracts from 'Feminist Literary Criticism', in *Modern Literary Theory*, (ed.) Ann Jefferson and David Robey (London, 1986), pp. 204–21.)

Summary

The title of 'Feminist, Female, Feminine' alludes silently to the three categories of nineteenth-century women's writing identified in Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*. Moi redefines the terms and then uses them as the basis of a (mild) critique of Showalter's own theoretical position.

In the extract reprinted here it is argued that 'feminist' is a political term, 'female' a biological one, and 'feminine' a cultural definition. The essay calls into question the belief that female experience is the basis of feminism, or in other words that politics is a direct effect of biology. Meanwhile, if 'feminine' specifies a cultural rather than a biological difference, to oppose 'feminine' to 'masculine' in an absolute binary opposition is ultimately to reaffirm an essentialist and patriarchal distinction. It follows that to privilege 'feminine writing' (the *écriture féminine* of French feminism) is to be in perpetual danger of falling into yet another form of biological essentialism.

The essay goes on to develop the argument that 'the feminine' is not an essence but a culturally produced position of marginality in relation to patriarchal society. As a relational position rather than a fact of nature, it is a place from which to conduct a feminist politics committed to change.

Notes

1. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London, 1971), p. 25.
2. Dale Spender, *Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them* (London, 1982).
3. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, 1979).

4. Rosalind Coward, 'Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?', *The New Feminist Criticism*, (ed.) Elaine Showalter (London, 1986), p. 230.
5. For a discussion of such political differences within American feminism, see Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (London, 1984).
6. Coward, 'Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?', p. 237.
7. Mary Ellmann, *Thinking About Women* (New York, 1968); Penny Boumelha, *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form* (Brighton, 1982).
8. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis and Manchester, 1986), p. 64.
9. Verena Andermatt Conley, in her book on Cixous, would certainly disagree: see *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine* (Lincoln, Neb. and London, 1984). For a discussion of some of her views, see also Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London, 1985), pp. 123–6.
10. Meaning in Derrida's theory is always plural, unfixed, in 'play'.
11. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York, 1984). For Lacan and the symbolic order, see Elizabeth Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice* (London, 1984); Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*; and Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford, 1983); as well as Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan* (London, 1977), which for me remains the most serious and wide-ranging introduction to Lacan. (See also the Glossary. Eds.)
12. For a necessary critique of the political implications of Kristeva's theories at this point, see Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, pp. 150–73.
13. Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton, 1977).

9 Shoshana Felman, 'Woman and Madness: the Critical Phallacy' (From *Diacritics*, 5 (1975), pp. 2–10.)

Summary

Felman's essay was originally written as a review of three books, *Women and Madness* by Phyllis Chesler, Luce Irigaray's *Speculum de l'autre femme* and a new edition of Balzac's short story, *Adieu*. Chesler treats women's madness as either an effect or a refusal of the role allotted to women in our culture. Chesler's book reproduces the voices of women. Irigaray is also critical of the place of silence allocated to women, but she undertakes to speak *for* women in her own voice, and so casts doubt on her own undertaking. Chesler, without a theory, leaves women in the position of victims: Irigaray, on the other hand, offers a theoretical analysis, but fails to analyse the position from which she herself speaks. *Adieu*, meanwhile, is a story about a woman, madness and silence. Just as the institution of literary criticism systematically omits women from its concerns, silences them, so the modern commentators on *Adieu* excise the role of the woman in the story. Balzac's 'realism' is thus seen to concern itself with men and with reason: women