FEMINISM and GENDER

Feminism: the belief that women, just because they are women, are treated inequitably within a society, which is organised to prioritise male viewpoints and concerns. Feminism seeks to change this situation.

Literary feminism: deals with the ways in which women are represented and are self-represented in literary works and in the literary canon. -> literature is always already politics (i.e. the way in which w. are represented in literature has strong connections with the way in which they are represented in politics)

Gender studies: focuses upon the historical, social, and psychological systems within which sexual identity becomes meaningful. Challenges the “heterosexual matrix” Premise: there is a difference to be made between sex (male/female) as something biologically given, gender (masculine/feminine) as a social construct, and sexuality (heterosexual/homosexual), as a variable sexual behaviour and orientation. Questions the naturalization of a patriarchal system, which defines male heterosexuality as the norm.

->ideology critique (!): what has been taken as *natural* and neutral (i.e “obvious”) is shown to be *cultural*, historical and strongly biased; as sth. that helps to maintain existing (historically developed and culturally constructed) power relations.

e.g. Michel Foucault: *The History of Sexuality* (1976-84)

anti-repressive hypothesis: Victorian discourse on sexuality did no repress sexuality, but created it as an object of investigation -> emergence of the concept of the homosexual in the 19th c.

Discourse, discoursive formations: they do not “describe things”, but both constitute their objects and generate knowledge about their objects – Knowledge = normative knowledge -> regulation -> Power

methods of producing “Knowledge”: observation –> examination -> normalising judgment: sane-mad, heterosexual-homosexual, normality-perversion.

“This new persecution of the peripheral sexualities entailed an *incorporation of perversions* and a new *specification of individuals.* As defined by the ancient civil orcanonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator wasnothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexualbecame a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being atype of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly amysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffectedby his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actionsbecause it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestlyon his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. It wasconsubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature. … The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.”

->F. shows that what we percieve as “natural” (such as the existence of the “homosexual” as a concept) is in fact culturally and historically constructed by the discourse of psychiatry (psychiatry became a “discipline” in the 19th c.).

-> biopolitics: Western society moves from a regimen where the ruler controls the right over life and death to one where life itself becomes a subject to control. Biopolitics governs in burocratic, scientific, rule-based ways, ostensibly (!) to improve the health and well-being of citizens. (See more later on Foucault!!!)

FEMINISM

Situation of women in the 18th c.

“the very being or legal existence of a woman is suspended, or at least it is

incorporated or consolidated into that of the husband, under whose wing, protection and

cover she performs everything” (William Blackstone’s Commentary on the Laws of England, 1765)

Mary Wollstonecraft: *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792):

(<-Thomas Paine: *Rights of Man*, 1792 – in support of the French Revolution: “all men are equal before the law”, need for representative democracy, and not one based on inheritance) Wollstonecraft argues for women’s right to education, which would pave the way for their economic independence.

Situation of women in the Victorian period:

married woman: cannot inherit, cannot keep personal property – all belongs to the husband (including, for instance the copyright laws of the woman’s work).

divorce: a husband can sue his wife for divorce on grounds of adultery, but a

wife has to prove incest or bigamy in addition to adultery + after the divorce: the husband gets all the property, and becomes the natural guardian of children.

1849, 1853: foundation of Bedford College and Queen’s College, in London. –> women gain access to university education.

John Stuart Mill: “The Subjection of Women” (1869)

Women should not only be treated as potential mothers. Soc. treats and trades women as slaves. -> argues against the “legal subordination of one sex to the other”, based solely on physical stregth. -> argues for the equality of rights. Mill is the first MP to propose giving women a vote in 1867.

1882: Married Woman Property Act: husband and wife are two separate legal entities, wife also has a right to sue the husband, and can dispose of, sell or buy her separate property.

After WWI:

Sufragette movement-> vote: in 1918 (for women over 30), in 1928 (men + women over 21).

Virginia Woolf: *A Room of One's Own* (1929)

“a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction”

Shakespeare’s sister with Shakespeare’s genius would not have had the opportunity to become a playwright <-resricted education, no opportunities: women enclosed in the domestic sphere, they have to stay at home

[domestic/private sphere: women <-> public/political sphere: men]

It is not enough to grant a place to the greatest women writers in literary history, minor figures (Mrs Aphra Behn, Dorothy Osborne) are also important: “Without those forerunners, Jane Austen and the Brontës and George Eliot could no more have written than Shakespeare could have written without Marlowe or Marlowe without Chaucer, or Chaucer without those forgotten poets who paved the ways and tamed the natural savagery of the tongue”

Argues against the male projected inferiority and weakness of women: women are mirrors in which men can pose and perform their heroic actions

Concept of androgyny – people, and esp. artists are androgynous (cf: *Orlando*)

After WW II.

1970: Women’s Liberation Conference: Ruskin College, Oxford (over 500 participants.)

demands: equal pay, equal education and opportunity, 24-hour nurseries, free contraception and the right to abortion.

Simone de Beauvoir: *The Second Sex* (1949)

Influenced by Sartre’s Existentialism☺

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman;”

“No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... which is described as feminine.”

Why women have allowed men to subordinate them?

1. Excluded from the public sphere, women fail to form the bonds that men make in war, pubs, government and business. No potential female group identity. Marriage binds women to domesticity and perpetuates the belief that if the female is protected and provided for by his male partner, she is happy. However, she argues (via existentialism) that human potential must be judged in terms of both liberty and happiness (but rather liberty).

Public/political sphere: transcendental, rational, judgemental, the perpetuation of knowledge, of the ideas of the future -> liberty of men

Private/domestic sphere: nature, the body, feelings, procreation.-> women enclosed here

It is women’s reproductive cycle and lesser physical strength that bound them to domesticity.

(later feminists: the personal is always already political)

2. Woman is always situated as the “other” of man, whereas man has always an identity in himself (cf Freud: women lack the penis, and envy it)-> ‘the woman’ has no substance, she is defined by “lack” -> she becomes a screen of projection for male fantasies and fears. -> has to vindicate her autonomy.

Myth of the Eternal Feminine:

“As against the dispersed, contingent, and multiple existences of actual women, mythical thought opposes the Eternal Feminine, unique and changeless. If the definition provided for this concept is contradicted by the behaviour of flesh-and-blood women, it is the latter who are wrong: we are told not that Feminity is a false entity, but that the women concerned are not feminine.”

Kate Millett: *Sexual Politics* (1970)

Sex is a ‘status category with political implications’. Patriarchy is the primary form of human oppression -> the ideology of “feminity” has created a psychic structure in women –> women are complicit in their own oppression: a “dependency class”, identifying their own survival with the prosperity of those who feed them.

Phallogocentric criticism: investigates male writers from a female point of view. How canonical male writers (D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, etc) contribute to the degradation of women. Even those who portray women’s situation in a realistic way, contribute to the conservative maintainance of patriarchy. E.g. both Flaubert’s Emma Bovary and Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina (adulterous wives) commit suicide -> the transgressive female is penalized, and the patriarchal moral code is reasserted.

->focus on and promotion of the role of the reader

<– women have been educated to read bisexually, and identify with the male protagonist -->this has to change: Millett reads canonical works by men from a female point of view.

Gynocriticism:

* works to increase the number of female writers in the canon. Why did they disappear? <-male critics and male reviewers -> literary “value” always already gendered.
* focus on how female experience (female) voice is represented in literature
* rather than victimising women, it focuses on their “awakening”
* pen=penis -> authorship-Author-God, all are men ->need to change this situation

->later: 1. accused of “essentialism” – as if there was such a thing as “female experience” 2. criticised bc. it takes the white, heterosexual, middle-class woman as the norm.

Elaine Showalter: *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1978),

Women: different life -> different literature (impossible to judge the value of women’s literature based on male norms)

History of feminism - 3 phases:

1. Feminine phase: 1840-1880

Women write in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of male culture. Imitation of men, interiorisation of male aesthetic standards, male pseudonyms. (E.g. George Eliot **-** Mary Ann (Marian) Evans, poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell: the Bronte sisters)

1. Feminist Phase: 1880-1920

Protest against men, expression of a shared responsibility in suffering.

1. Female Phase: from 1920

Women reject both imitation and protest (two forms of dependency) and turn instead to the expression of female experience. (E.g. Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf. Doris Lessing)

Gilbert and Gubar: *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979)

E.g. Charlotte Bronte: *Jane Eyre*

Bertha Mason, the madwoman in the attic is read by G&G as the unconscious articulation of the hidden fears of patriarchy <- the body (Bertha) is denied a place in the rational order of things (associated with masculinity) - women come to be identified with everything that is feared as irrational -> such fears appear to justify the social control and containemnet of the female body (Kristeva’s abject) –> “*the monstrous feminine*” [later, Postcolonialist criticism also emphasises that Bertha is a Jamaican woman, and as such, she embodies the fears of British imperialism)

Jane Eyre: airy, aesthetic object

Is Jane Eyre a feminist novel? Female *Bildungsroman,* female experience, but end of the novel: “Reader, I married him” – inscribes the woman as a subject within the patriarchal system, Jane Eyre becomes the repository of domestic virtues, entirely enclosed into the private sphere.

French Feminism: more theoretical, less pragmatic, informed by French deconstruction

1. Kristeva (see: earlier)
2. Hélene Cixous b. 1937.:

Criticises Freud’s and Lacan’s “phallogocentric system”. (phallogocentric – via Derrida’s logocentric: the structure of language is centred by the phallus)

Freud’s theory of the girl’s oedipal development: genital phase (active sexuality: pleasure in the clitoris) + attachment to the mother -> oedipal stage: desire for the father (penis envy) -> adulthood: desire for men - passive sexuality (pleasure in the vagina), reproduction, heterosexuality ->adult sexuality: not about not about female sexuality, but about male sexuality: the woman's pleasure is to come from being passively filled by a penis.

Lacan: the child must separate from its mother's body in order to enter into the symbolic order of language -> (mother’s body->female body) -> the female body becomes unrepresentable in language -> female sexuality, female sexual pleasure is unrepresentable within the phallogocentric Symbolic order.

->Is it possible for a woman to write as a woman? Or does entry into the Symbolic means that one always speaks and writes as a "man"?

Cixous: for women to write themselves, they must (re)claim a female-centred sexuality -> “*écriture feminine*” (female writing): very much like Kristeva’s semiotic – closer to the unconscious - rhythm, poetry, without fixed meanings, fluid, disruptive, maternal -> produces a rupture in the Symbolic order –> politically transformative, revolutionary.

anti-essentialist (i.e. there is no such thing as essential womanhood):

“But there is no invention, of other I’s, no poetry, no fiction without a certain homosexuality (interplay, thereof, of bisexuality) making in me a crytalized work of my ultrasubjectivities” (*Sorties*) -> there is a form of bisexuality in all forms of radical writing -> *écriture feminine* is bisexual, it disrupts the binary between male and female, between hetero- and homosexual, constructed by the patriarchal order. (It has nothing to do with “essential womanhood”!)

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The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975)

Myth of the Medusa: a woman with snakes for hair, her look turns men into stone. Freud reads the Medusa as part of the fear of castration: she is scary because she has too many penises (i.e. snakes for her hair). Cixous: men fear to lose their own penises, but this fear is a mere projection, they project a threat onto the figure of the Medusa. If women could show men that female sexuality or female pleasure is *not* about penises at all, that women cannot castrate bc. they do not have a penis, but a completely different sort of sexuality, then men would cease to project threat and fear on the body of women -> need for a new, radical form of writing, which has nothing to do with the phallus, or the phallogocentric system.

American Post-Feminism

Judith Butler: b. 1956. : the preformativity of gender (informed by Derrida, and theatre)

### *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990)

### *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993)

### “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” (1990):

### Beauvoir: “one is not born, but becomes a woman” -> performativity of gender

### Butler: “Because there is neither an "essence" that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all.”

### (the example of the transvestite lays bare the way in which gender is essentially a performance, and which can be entirely independent from any “naturally given”)

### Influenced by:

### Beauvoir (see above)

### Derrida’s account of iterability (repetition)

### Austen’s idea of the performative (see in Derrida’s text)

and: Louis Althusser: “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1968)

There is no “outside” ideology: ideology gains its power from being *obvious* and“natural” for everyone. (Ideology critique: shows that everything we take for natural and obvious is in fact cultural and historical.)

Ideological state apparatuses: education, religion, family. They always already call us/interpellate us as “subjects” (students, believers, girls or boys) -> we work by ourselves to be recognised as “subjects” (to be obedient to God, to the schoolmaster, to our parents, all in all: to be good subjects.) – we are accomplices in our own subjection, bc. we accept that this is the way things “obviously” are, and should be.

Paradox: subject means two things:

1. a free subjectivity, a centre of initiatives, author and responsible for its actions ->agency
2. a subjected being who subjects to a higher authority -> lack of agency

->the ISA interpellates the individual as free subject so that he or she can freely accept its subjection.

(question: how to oppose ideology if it is everywhere? how to reclaim agency?)

### Butler:

### Our gender comes into being through the *repeated performance* of different gender roles, which are constructed by society -> yet, since it has to be reiterated, repeated again and again so that it can be sustained, it is, in fact, not fixed: there is always a possibility for change through difference, through acting out roles differently.

### ->gender is a social construct (socially determined), and yet, one can make a difference by repeating differently the pre-given roles, by changing them.-> Butler acknowledges social determinism, but also reclaims agency by introducing the concept of performativity.

“If the "reality" of gender is constituted by the performance itself, then there is no recourse to an essential and unrealized "sex" or "gender" which gender performances ostensibly express. Indeed, the transvestite's gender is as fully real as anyone whose performance complies with social expectations. Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed…. That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex, a true or abiding

masculinity or femininity, are also constituted as part of the strategy by which the

### performative aspect of gender is concealed.”

### What does it mean that there is “no essence”? What does it mean to question the essence of the *biological* sex?

### The biological givens (penis, vagina, etc.) *do* exist. However: the moment they enter discourse or language or culture (as they always already do), they are immediately interpreted (they are always already seen *as* something – cf. Heidegger), and acquire a *meaning* (e.g. penis=power). This meaning is always already determined by patriarchal society. That is: there is *no* pure sex, *no* pure biology.

### The idea that biological sex is sth “essential” suggests that gender is an expression of sth. biologically given -> this legitimates the heterosexual matrix. However, Butler argues that the belief that gender expresses biology is an ideology, a false belief system, which only serves to hide the artificial constructedness of gender, to hide the fact that gender is always already and artificial construct and that biological sex is never without an always already pre-constructed cultural and political meaning (i.e. penis=power, and vagina=lack).

### *The Psychic Life of Power*:

### Focus on corporeal vulnerability, on the infant’s corporeal dependency on others, on the bodily experience of others -> the subject is never entirely transparent to itself (non-transparency), there is always a dimension that remains opaque (e.g. at the heart of normative heterosexuality, there is both a disavowed loss of and identification with homosexual desire) -> I am always partially “foreign to myself” (via Kristeva)

### Normative violence: the operation of norms in determining who counts as subject. A subject (who is recognised as such) lives a ‘livable life”, that is, a life that is viable in the dominant normative order - someone is recognised as a subject if s/he is intelligible, that is, conform to the dominant norms. (By subject, she means, foremost, legal subject.) But what of those who are in some sense “out of the norm”? The concept of the “human” is a site of “normative struggle” still in place.