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Feminisms and Gender Studies

1. FEMINISMS AND FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM: DEFINITIONS

In keeping with constantly evolving developments in literary studies, our new title for this chapter emphasizes both the growing diversity of feminist theories—"feminisms"—as they engage with biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, Marxist, poststructuralist, and cultural studies, as well as ethnic and race studies, postcolonial theory, lesbian and gay studies, and gender studies.

No longer is feminism presumed to have a single set of assumptions, and it is definitely no longer merely the "ism" of white, educated, bourgeois, heterosexual Anglo-American women, as it once seemed to be. As Ross C. Murfin has noted, the "evolution of feminism into feminisms has fostered a more inclusive, global perspective" (301–2). The era of recovering women's texts has been succeeded by a new era in which the goal is to recover entire cultures of women.

"I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is," British author and critic Rebecca West remarks; "I only know that other people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or prostitute" (219). Indeed, feminism has often focused upon what is absent rather than what is present, reflecting concern with the silencing and marginalization of women in a patriarchal culture, a culture organized in the favor of men. Unlike the other approaches we have examined thus far, feminism is an overtly political approach and can attack other approaches for their false assumptions about women. As Judith Fetterly has bluntly pointed out, "Literature is political," and its politics "is male." When we read "the canon of what is currently considered classic American literature" we "perforce . . . identify as male" (in Rivkin and Ryan 561). In recent decades this tendency has changed, in part because of the efforts of feminist critics but also because of social changes such as mass education, the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, increasing urbanization, and the growing liberalization of sexual mores.

Notwithstanding the contributions of revolutionary nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors such as Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughter Mary Shelley, George Eliot, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Virginia Woolf, feminist literary criticism developed mostly since the beginning of the late-twentieth-century women's movement. That movement included the writings of Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, and Betty Friedan, who examined a female "self" constructed in literature by male authors to embody various male fears and anxieties. They saw literary texts as models and agents of power. In her book The Second Sex (1949), de Beauvoir asked what is woman, and how is she constructed differently from men? Answer: she is constructed differently by men. The thesis that men write about women to find out more about men has had long-lasting implications, especially the idea that man defines the human, not woman.

In The Feminine Mystique (1963) Friedan demystified the dominant image of the happy American suburban housewife and mother. Her book appeared amidst new women's organizations, manifestos, protests, and publications that called for enforcement of equal rights and an end to sex discrimination. An author of essays in Good Housekeeping, Friedan also analyzed reductive images of women in American magazines.

Millett's Sexual Politics (1970) was the first widely read work of feminist literary criticism. Millett's focus was upon the twin poles of gender as biology and culture. In her analyses of D. H. Lawrence, Norman Mailer, Henry Miller, and Jean Genet she reads literature as a record of male dominance. As a "resisting
reader,” Millett included critiques of capitalism, male power, crude sexuality, and violence against women. She argued that male writers distort women by associating them with (male) deviance. She aptly concludes that the “interior colonization” of women by men is “sturdier than any form of segregation” such as class, “more uniform, and certainly more enduring” (24–25).

At the same time as women have been re-read in works by male writers, feminists have promoted the underappreciated work of women authors, and the writings of many women have been rediscovered, reconsidered, and collected in large anthologies such as The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women, including women who had never been considered seriously or had been elided over time. For example, Harriet E. Wilson, author of the first novel by an African American woman, Our Nig, the story of a free black (1859), was “discovered” one hundred and fifty years later in a rare book store by Yale scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. However, merely unearthing women’s literature did not ensure its prominence; in order to assess women’s writings, the preconceptions inherent in a literary canon dominated by male beliefs and male writers needed to be reevaluated. Along with Fetterly, other critics such as Elaine Showalter, Annette Kolodny, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar questioned cultural, sexual, intellectual, and/or psychological stereotypes about women and their literatures using both essentialist and constructivist models, which we discuss below. The focus upon the silencing and oppressing of women gave way to deeper interrogations of what a history of women’s oppression meant. As Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan ask, “Was ‘woman’ something to be escaped from or into?” (528). Though much of the early “sisterhood” solidarity of the women’s movement was lost as the field diversified, a good deal of philosophical and political depth was attained as these interrogations became more complex.

II. WOMAN: CREATED OR CONSTRUCTED?

Elaine Showalter has identified three phases of modern women’s literary development: the feminine phase (1840–80), during which women writers imitated the dominant male traditions; the feminist phase (1880–1920), when women advocated for their rights; and the female phase (1920–present), when dependency upon opposition—that is, on uncovering misogyny in male texts—is replaced by the rediscovery of women’s texts and women. Women’s literature is “an imaginative continuum [of] certain patterns, themes, problems, and images, from generation to generation” (“Feminist Criticism” 11). Within the present or “female” phase, Showalter describes four current models of difference taken up by many feminists around the world: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural.

Showalter’s biological model is the most problematic: if the text can be said in some way to mirror the body, then does that reduce women writers merely to bodies? Yet Showalter praises the often shocking frankness of women writers who relate the intimacies of the female experience of the female body.

Showalter’s linguistic model asserts that women are speaking men’s language as a foreign tongue; purging language of “sexism” is not going far enough. Still, feminist critics see the very act of speaking—and of having a language—as a victory for women within a silencing patriarchal culture. Tillie Olsen demands to hear women’s voices despite impediments to creativity encountered by women; in her 1978 work Silences she cites “those mute inglorious Miltons: those whose working hours are all struggle for existence; the barely educated; the illiterate; women. Their silence is the silence of the centuries as to how life was, is, for most of humanity” (327). Silences arise from “circumstances” of being born “into the wrong class, race or sex, being denied education, becoming numbed by economic struggle, muzzled by censorship or distracted or impeded by the demands of nurturing.” But women’s deployment of silence can also be “resistance to the dominant discourse,” Olsen notes, such as Emily Dickinson’s “slant truths” or the inner dialogues of such “quiet” characters as Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre or Virginia Woolf’s Lily Briscoe (quoted in Fishkin and Hedges 5). A recent film treatment of this theme is The Hours (2002), starring Nicole Kidman, Meryl Streep, and Julianne Moore. This movie relates with unnerving clarity the inner lives of three women connected through their experiences with Woolf’s novel Mrs. Dalloway, itself a study of female subjectivity.

Though women writers may have to use “male” language, feminist critics have identified sex-related writing strategies
such as the use of associational rather than linear logic, other “feminine” artistic choices such as free play of meaning and a lack of closure, as well as genre preference such as letters, journals, confessional, domestic, and body-centered discourse. As Showalter has observed, “English feminist criticism, essentially Marxist, stresses opposition; French feminist criticism, essentially psychoanalytic, stresses repression; American feminist criticism, essentially textual, stresses expression.” All three, however, being woman-centered or gynocentric, must search for terminology to rescue themselves from becoming a synonym for inferiority (“Feminist Criticism” 186).

Showalter’s psychoanalytic model identifies gender difference in the psyche and also in the artistic process. Her cultural model places feminist concerns in social contexts, acknowledging class, racial, national, and historical differences and determinants among women. It also offers a collective experience that unites women over time and space—a “binding force” (“Feminist Criticism” 186–88, 193, 196–202). These have been Showalter’s most influential models.

Today it seems that two general tendencies, one emphasizing Showalter’s biological, linguistic, and psychoanalytic models, and the other emphasizing Showalter’s cultural model, account for most feminist theories. On the one hand, certain theories may be said to have an essentialist argument for inherent feminine traits—whether from biology, language, or psychology—that have been undervalued, misunderstood, or exploited by a patriarchal culture because the genders are quite different. These theories focus on sexual difference and sexual politics and are often aimed at defining or establishing a feminist literary canon or re-interpreting and re-visioning literature (and culture and history and so forth) from a less patriarchal slant.

Opposed to this notion that gender confers certain essential feminine and masculine traits is constructivist feminism, which asks women (and men) to consider what it means to be a woman, to consider how much of what society has often deemed to be inherently female traits are in fact culturally and socially constructed. For the constructivist the feminine and gender itself are made by culture in history and are not eternal norms. It is easy to see how constructivist feminism helped give rise to gender studies, the framing of all gender categories as cultural instead of biological. It is also clear that such fluidity of definition has links in poststructuralist and postmodernist thinking in general (see chapters 9 and 10).

A. Feminism and Psychoanalysis

Many essentialist feminists, to whom psychoanalytic theory have given their own stamp. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar examine female images in the works of Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Charlotte, and Emily Bronte, and George Eliot, addressing such topics as mothering, living within enclosures, doubling of characters and of aspects of the self, women’s diseases and their treatments, and feminized landscapes. They make the argument that female writers often identify themselves with the literary characters they detest through such types as the monster/madwoman figure counterposed against an angel/heroine figure. Despite this tendency, they describe a feminine utopia for which women authors yearn and where wholeness rather than “otherness” would prevail as a means of identity.

In the 1980s, French feminism developed as one of the most exciting of new feminist practices in the use of psychoanalytic tools for literary analysis. Essentialists found that psychoanalytic theory as espoused by Sigmund Freud, Carl G. Jung, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva, and the French Feminists Helène Cixous and Luce Irigaray explained some of their biologically based assumptions about femininity; readers found original and compelling new psychic models for feminine identity, open to flexibility and change by their very “nature” as feminine (see Irigaray, “When Our Lips Speak Together”).

Freud has long been on Feminism’s Enemies List, the charge being that he totally misunderstood women and was interested only in what they meant for male psychology. Freud practiced upon his devoted daughter Anna and Marie Bonaparte, both of whom carried on his work. These and other women whom he diagnosed as “hystérices” were the cornerstone of psychoanalysis. In Freud’s defense, the narratives given by his female patients represented radically new acceptance of their voices in their first-person accounts of fantasies, fears, injuries, and diseases. Before such maladies as Freud addressed could be treated
medical, they first had to be voiced subjectively. Today such common (but often terrifying) complaints of women including postpartum depression, major depression, chronic fatigue syndrome, and fibromyalgia are responded to as real health crises with a combination of medical and psychological help; but in Freud’s day they were dismissed as ordinary “female trouble.” Particularly troublesome women in those days could even face hysterectomies (the uterus was considered the font of *hysteria*, from the same Greek word), or merely isolation and shock treatments. Freud’s contribution was not only to identify and “medicalize” women’s psychiatric obstacles but also to emphasize the textual nature of his cases; indeed, he seemed to read his patients like texts or languages. Freud also argued that art, whether by men or women, had a pathological origin; following Freud, maneuvers such as bringing a “repressed” subtext to light are similar moves in psychoanalysis and literary criticism, for the goal of both is deeper understanding (see Young-Bruehl, *Freud on Women: A Reader* for selections on women).

From the Freudian revisionist Jacques Lacan comes the notion of the Imaginary, a pre-Oedipal stage in which the child has not yet differentiated here-or himself from the mother and as a consequence has not learned language, which is the Symbolic Order to be taught by the father. The Imaginary is the vital source of language later tamed by the Laws of the Father. The Oedipal crisis marks the entrance of the child into a world of language as Symbolic Order in which everything is separate, conscious and unconscious, self and other, male and female, word and feeling. In the realm of the Law of the Father we are confined by “isms” or rules; Lacan calls this the “phallocentric” universe (phallus + logos) in which men are in control of “the word.” French feminists practice what they call l’écriture féminine as a psychically freeing form of feminine discourse: the actual sex of the author, for them, is not always important (as it too is an expression of binary Laws of the Father).

The relevance of Freud and Lacan (see also chapter 6) has mainly to do, then, with the intersections of language and the psyche (combining Showalter’s linguistic and psychoanalytic models). Like Freud, Lacan describes the unconscious as structured like a language; like language its power often arises from the sense of openness and play of meaning. When we “read” language, we may identify gaps in what is signified as evidence of the unconscious; for language is a mixture of fixed meaning (conscious) and metaphor (in part unconscious). The feminine “language” of the unconscious destabilizes sexual categories in the Symbolic Order of the Father, disrupting the unities of discourse and indicating its silencings. French feminists speak of “exploding” rather than interpreting a sign. Hélène Cixous proposes a utopian place, a primeval female space free of symbolic order, sex roles, otherness, and the Law of the Father. Here the self is still linked to the voice of the mother, source of all feminine expression; to gain access to this place is to find an immeasurable source of creativity.

However, as in the case of Luce Irigaray, no matter how theoretical and abstract French feminists’ prose becomes or how complicated their psychoanalytic analyses, French feminists do not stray far from the body. As Rivkin and Ryan explain, “Luce Irigaray distinguishes between blood and shame, between the direct link to material nature in women’s bodies and the flight from such contact that is the driving force of male abstraction, its pretense to be above matter and outside of nature (in civilization).” Irigaray etymologically links the word “matter” to “maternity” and “matrix,” the latter being the space for male philosophizing and thinking. Matter is irreducible to “male western conceptuality.... [O]utside and making possible, yet impossible to assimilate to male reason, matter is what makes women women, an identity and an experience of their own, forever apart from male power and male concepts” (*Speculum* 529).

As Rivkin and Ryan further note, essentialists like Irigaray see women as “innately capable of offering a different ethics from men, one more attuned to preserving the earth from destruction by weapons devised by men.” It is because men “abstract themselves” from the material world as they separate from their mothers and enter the patriarchate that they adopt a “violent and aggressive posture toward the world left behind, which is now construed as an ‘object.’” For them the mother represents “the tie to nature that must be overcome... to inaugurate civilization as men understand it (a set of abstract rules for assigning identities, appropriate social roles and the like that favor male power over women).” Because women are not required to separate from the mother, “no cut is required, no separation that
launches a precarious journey towards a fragile ‘identity’ predicated on separation that simply denies its links to the physical world.” Irigaray would point out by way of example that when confronted with ethical issues, men think in terms of rights, “while women think in terms of responsibilities to others” (Rivkin and Ryan 529–30). A quotation from Jung seems apposite here: “When one has slain the father, one can obtain possession of his wife, and when one has conquered the mother, one can free one’s self” (432).

(We anticipate here a comment on the novel Frankenstein, which we treat later. Victor Frankenstein certainly springs to mind as a man who must “cut” his ties with the material domestic world around him by abstracting life itself, then being repelled by its materiality, especially when he sets about making his female Creature. What a price he pays, and how awful the sacrifices of everyone around him, for his obsession with the Law of the Father.)

Julia Kristeva furnishes a more specifically therapeutic sort of psychoanalysis of women in works such as her Desire in Language, in which she presents a mother-centered realm of the semiotic as opposed to the symbolic. Echoing Lacanian theory, she argues that the semiotic realm of the mother is present in symbolic discourse as absence or contradiction, and that great writers are those who offer their readers the greatest amount of disruption of the nameable. (One thinks of Sethe’s horrific memories in Toni Morrison’s Beloved.) Like Cixous and Irigaray, Kristeva opposes phallocentrism with images derived from women’s corporeal experiences, connecting, like Marxist theory, the personal with the political and artistic. Kristeva’s later work moves away from strictly psychoanalytic theorizing toward a more direct embrace of motherhood as the model for psychic female health. “Stabat Mater,” her prose poem meditation on her own experience with maternity accompanied by a hypertext essay on the veneration of the Virgin Mary, understands motherhood as, like language, a separation accompanied by a joining of signification, the loss being the marker of the infant’s embrace of identity (178). Many feminists follow Kristeva’s privileging of motherhood, arguing that, as Rivkin and Ryan put it, “In the mother-child relationship might be found more of the constituents of identity... than are given during the later Oedipal stage” (531).

One other type of psychological approach, myth criticism (treated at length in chapter 7), has its adherents in feminist studies. Feminist myth critics tend to center their discussions on such archetypal figures as the Great Mother and other early female images and goddesses, viewing such women as Medusa, Cassandra, Arachne, Isis, and others as radical “others” who were worshipped by women and men as alternatives to the more often dominant male deities such as Zeus or Apollo. Adrienne Rich and others have defined myth as the key critical approach for women. Criticizing Jung and such later myth critics as Northrop Frye for privileging hegemonic Greco-Roman mythologies and consequently downplaying the role of the feminine from the pre-Greek past, as well as in diverse myths from other societies, Rich praises the mythic powers of motherhood even as she critiques the larger culture’s ignorance and stereotyping of motherhood.

Because it manages to bring together the personal and the cultural, myth criticism also holds promise for scholars interested in how various ethnic groups, especially minorities, can maintain their own rooted traditions and at the same time interact with other mythologies. Even the most negative images in mythology, such as Medusa from ancient Greece, retain attraction for modern women, for anthropology teaches us that when many formerly matriarchal societies in the “Western” tradition were supplanted by patriarchal societies that venerated male gods instead of the older “Earth Mothers,” many goddesses were metamorphosed as witches, seductresses, or fools. Studying these ancient transformations alerts us to the plasticity of all sexual categories and the ongoing revisions of “the feminine.”

B. Multicultural Feminisms

Among the most prominent of feminist minorities are women of color and lesbians. These feminists practice what is sometimes called identity politics, based upon essential differences from white, heterosexual, “mainstream” society, hence their inclusion here as essentialists. Although many nonwhite feminists include each other in shared analyses of oppression, and while feminism has largely aligned itself with arguments against racism, xenophobia, and homophobia, people protest being lumped together as though their fundamental concerns are the
same. Here we review some of the major concerns specific to one group of minority feminists, black feminists, and later in gender studies we note some important lesbian feminists. But feminists of many different groups, including Latina and Chicana feminists, Asian American feminists, and Native American feminists all have their own particular sets of cultural issues; these are referenced at greater length in chapter 9, “Cultural Studies.” It is fair to say that “minority” feminisms share in both essentialist and constructivist views; that is, whereas ethnic difference is a fact to be celebrated, feminists of color recognize the ways women and race are both constructs in society.

Like lesbian feminists, black feminists argue that they face additional layers of the patriarchy that discourage their “coming out.” Not only do they reject the traditional Western literary canon aslopsided in favor of men, but they also specifically target its exclusion of black women. Black feminists have accused their white sisters of wishing merely to become rewarded members of the patriarchy at the expense of nonwhite women. That is, they say that the majority of feminists want to become members of the power structure, counted as men and sharing in the bounties of contemporary capitalist culture, equal wages, child care, or other accepted social “rights.” A black or lesbian feminist might see a heterosexual white woman as having more in common with men than with other women of different ethnicities and classes. Maggie Humm has suggested that “the central motifs of black and lesbian criticism need to become pivotal to feminist criticism rather than the other way around” (106). Michael Awkward makes black feminists’ concerns clearer when he distinguishes between how they influence each other as opposed to traditional white male models of influence. In Inscribing Influences: Tradition, Revision, and Afro-American Women’s Novels, he claims that black women writers carry out relationships as mothers, daughters, sisters, and aunts as very different from the patriarchally enforced relationships of fatherhood and sonship, with their traditional Oedipal conflicts.

To a greater extent than white authors, black women writers have been elided from critical history or included merely as tokens. Since the 1960s interest in black culture, especially African American culture, has grown dramatically in American literary criticism. In fact, criticism, theory, conferences, and book publishing have barely been able to keep up with the flood of academic and popular interest in black feminism. The term black feminist, however, is problematic. Alice Walker, author of The Color Purple (1982), disputes the term feminist as applied to black women; she writes that she has replaced feminist with womanist, remarking that a womanist does not turn her back upon the men of her community. Interestingly, that charge was made against her by black male critics responding to the portrayal of African American men in The Color Purple after the Steven Spielberg film version appeared in 1985 (see In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose). As in “Everyday Use,” Walker identifies black female creativity from earlier generations in such folk arts as quilting, music, and gardening. Walker looks to her own literary mothers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Harlem Renaissance figure and folklorist, who insisted upon using authentic black dialect and folklore. Walker’s novel Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) without apology or emendation. This tendency to privilege the black language and folkways she grew up with alienated Hurston from some of the male leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, including Langston Hughes, who preferred a more (mainstream) intellectual approach, which they saw as more activist in nature, such as the protest novels of writers like Ralph Ellison and especially Richard Wright.

Seeking out other autobiographical voices, black feminists have often turned to the slave narrative and the captivity narrative, both old American forms of discourse, as of special importance to black women writers. Challenges to the traditional canon have also included new bibliographies of neglected or suppressed works and the recovery and rehabilitation of such figures as the tragic mulatta or Mammy figure by such leading critics as bell hooks and Maya Angelou.

Related to the rise of feminisms among women of color is the area of postcolonial studies, which we treat in chapter 9. Among its most prominent feminist voices is that of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who examines the effects of political independence upon subaltern, or subproletarian women, in Third World countries. In such works as the essays of In Other Worlds, Spivak has made clearer both the worldwide nature of the feminist movement, as well as the great differences among feminisms, depending upon class and political structure.
C. Marxist Feminism

Perhaps the most significant source of constructivist feminism is Marxism, especially its focus upon the relations between reading and other social constructions. The establishment of so many women’s studies programs, cooperatives, bookstores, libraries, film boards, political caucuses, and community groups attests to the activist orientation of feminism. As Karl Marx argued that all historical and social developments are determined by the forms of economic production (see chapter 9), Marxist feminists have attacked the “classist” values of the prevailing capitalist society of the West as the world also gradually becomes “globalized.” Marxist feminists do not separate “personal” identity from class identity, and they direct attention to the often-nameless underpinnings of cultural productions, including the conditions of production of texts, such as the economics of the publishing industry.

Marxist feminists, like other Marxists, are attacked for misunderstanding the nature of quality in art. For them, literary value is not a transcendent property (just as sex roles are not inherent) but rather something conditioned by social beliefs and needs. What is “good” art for a Marxist critic often seems to be merely what a given group of people decide is good, and it is sometimes hard to differentiate that process from one which Formalists would endorse. Yet Lillian Robinson, a prominent Marxist feminist, has pointed out that even a seemingly innocuous approach such as Formalism is encoded with class interests, connecting it to the systematic exclusion of women, nonwhites, and the working class. Feminist criticism, in contrast, should be “criticism with a cause, engaged criticism . . . It must be ideological and moral criticism; it must be revolutionary” (3).

D. Feminist Film Studies

Contemporary constructivist positions such as those emerging in film studies by such scholars as Teresa de Lauretis and Laura Mulvey are inspired by the Marxist notion of the social construction of individual subjectivity (especially as outlined by Louis Althusser) and by the poststructuralist idea that languages write identities, and do not merely reflect them. “Gender identity is no less a construction of patriarchal culture than the idea that men are somehow superior to women; both are born at the same time and with the same stroke of the pen,” as Rivkin and Ryan put it. Constructivists worry that essentialists are interpreting the subordination of women as women’s nature: “At its most radical, the constructivist counter-paradigm embraces such categories as performativity, masquerade, and imitation, which are seen as cultural processes that generate gender identities that only appear to possess a pre-existing natural or material substance. Of more importance than physical or biological difference might be psychological identity.” Following the thinking of Judith Butler, these theorists see gender as “performatives,” an imitation of a “code” that refers to no natural substance. Indeed, “Masculine means not feminine as much as it means anything natural” (Rivkin and Ryan 530).

Laura Mulvey’s insight that films can compel the female viewer to participate in her own humiliation by watching the film as a man is borne out in her analysis of the technical and psychological organization of the classic Hollywood film, and her analysis has been eagerly embraced by literary critics, who transfer her insights on film to the printed page. The “male gaze” she describes (like the Lacanian Symbolic Order) is based upon voyeurism and fetishism, the only available pleasure (usually) being the male one of looking at women’s bodies for sexual cues. Mulvey uses examples from Alfred Hitchcock films to show how male ambivalence toward the overall image of woman causes viewers to choose amongst devaluing, punishing, or saving a guilty female, or turning her into a pedestal figure, a fetish. These extremes leave little place for the female viewer: according to Mulvey, woman is the image, and man the bearer of the look, the voyeur: “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance pleasure in looking has been split . . . [and] the male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is stylized accordingly” (304–9). Students can easily call to mind examples from current films to corroborate Mulvey’s insights: think about how differently women’s bodies are portrayed in films like Charlie’s Angels: Full Throttle (2002) and Monster (2003), or how both male and female gazes are engaged by Kill Bill (2003, 2004).

Despite their divergences and different goals, feminisms still seek to integrate competing worlds: Adrienne Rich describes feminism as “the place where in the most natural, organic way
subjectivity and politics have to come together” (in Gelpi and Gelpi 114). As we have seen, such movement toward integration allows feminisms to do many different sorts of things: protest the exclusion of women from the literary canon, focus upon the personal (such as diary literature), make political arguments, align itself with other movements, and redefine literary theory and even language itself. Maggie Humm reminds us that male critics in the past were generally perceived to be “unaligned” and “a feminist [was] seen as a case for special pleading.” but that today it is clear that masculinity rather than feminism tends to be blind to the implications of gender (12–13). Feminist criticism is not, as Toril Moi has observed, “just another interesting critical approach” like “a concern for sea-imagery or metaphors of war in medieval poetry” (204). It does represent one of the most important social, economic, and aesthetic revolutions of modern times.

III. GENDER STUDIES

As a constructivist endeavor, gender studies examines how gender is less determined by nature than it is by culture, and as we noted with Showalter’s cultural model, such a cultural analysis is at the center of the most complex and vital critical enterprises at the present time. Rivkin and Ryan name their introduction to their essays on gender studies “Contingencies of Gender,” which aptly suggests the fluid nature of all gender categories. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s feminists and gender critics, especially those in Gay and Lesbian Studies, have experienced and articulated common ground in oppression and struggle. In the past, descriptions of prose in masculine terms (a “virile” style or “seminal” argument) were taken as the norm; today, a piece of writing might be criticized as limited by its masculine point of view. Myra Jehlen claims that traditional critics wish to reduce the complexities of sexuality to a false common denominator. With authors who seem unconscious of gender as an issue we must make an effort to read for it instead: “... literary criticism involves action as much as reflection, and reading for gender makes the deed explicit.” As “heterosexual” and “homosexual” men and women escape the masculine norms of society, everyone benefits (263–65, 273).

For both feminists and gender critics, society portrays binary oppositions like masculine and feminine or straight and gay as natural categories, but as David Richter notes, “the rules have little to do with nature and everything to do with culture.” The word homosexual has only a short history of one hundred years or so (it was new at the time of Oscar Wilde’s trial), and heterosexual is even newer. In any given culture, many theorists point out that what is “normal” sexually depends upon when and where one lives; for instance, pederasty was practiced by nobles of Periclean Athens, who also had sexual relationships with women, and both sorts of relationships were socially accepted. Homosexuality and heterosexuality may thus be seen as not two forms of identity but rather a range of overlapping behaviors. In a similar way, masculinity and femininity are constantly changing, so that today, as Richter notes, “women who wear baseball caps and fatigues, pump iron, and smoke cigars (at the appropriate time and season) can be perceived as more piquantly sexy by some heterosexual men than women who wear white frocks and gloves and look down demurely” (1436–37). Ross C. Murfin concurs: gender is a construct, “an effect of language, a culture, and its institutions.” Gender, not sex, makes an older man open the door for a young woman, and gender makes her expect it, resent it, or experience mixed feelings. “Sexuality is a continuum not a fixed and static set of binary oppositions” (339). Similarly, Teresa de Lauretis has described the “technologies of gender,” the forces in modern technological society that create sex roles in response to ideology and marketplace needs, specifically, “the product of various social technologies, such as cinema.” Following Michel Foucault’s theory of sexuality, she means by “technology” that “sexuality, commonly thought to be a natural as well as a private matter, is in fact completely constructed in culture according to the political aims of the society’s dominant class.” She concludes: “There is nothing outside or before culture, no nature that is not always and already enculturated” (2, 12).

In the 1970s and 1980s, after the famous Stonewall riots in New York that brought new focus upon gay, lesbian, and transvestite resistance to police harassment, gender critics studied the history of gay and lesbian writing and how gay and lesbian life is distorted in cultural history. For example, Adrienne Rich’s
work focuses upon liberation from what she calls “compulsory heterosexuality” a “beachhead of male dominance” that “needs to be recognized and studied as a political institution” (143, 145). Sharon O’Brien wrote on Willa Cather’s problematic attitude toward her own lesbianism, Terry Castle analyzed “things not fit to be mentioned” in eighteenth-century literature, and Lillian Faderman explored love between women in the Renaissance.

Lesbian critics counter their marginalization by considering lesbianism a privileged stance testifying to the primacy of women. Terms such as alterity, woman-centered, and difference take on new and more sharply defined meanings when used by lesbian critics. Lesbianism has been a stumbling block for other feminists, and lesbian feminists have at times excluded heterosexual feminists. Some define lesbianism as the “normal” relations of women to women, seeing heterosexuality as “abnormal.” This has led some heterosexual feminists to reject lesbian perspectives, but on the whole, lesbian feminists have guided other feminists into new appreciation of certain female traits in writing. They have also brought to the forefront the works of lesbian authors.

Lesbian critics reject the notion of a unified text, finding corroboration in poststructuralist and postmodernist criticism as well as among the French feminists. They investigate such textual features as mirror images, secret codes, dreams, and narratives of identity; they are drawn to neologisms, unconventional grammar, and other experimental techniques. One has only to think of the poetry and criticism of Gertrude Stein to see the difference such a self-consciously lesbian point of view entails. Like other feminists, they stress ambiguity and open-endedness of narratives and seek double meanings. Lesbian critics suggest new genres for study such as the female Gothic or female utopia. They are often drawn to such experimental women writers as Woolf, Stein, Radclyffe Hall, Colette, and Djuna Barnes, and to such popular genres as science fiction.

In 1978 the first volume of Foucault’s History of Sexuality was translated. It argued that homosexuality is a social, medical, and ontological category invented in the late nineteenth century and then imposed on sexual practices that prior to that time discouraged and punished nonreproductive sexual alternatives (Rivkin and Ryan 676–77). In the late 1980s after the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic, the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Warner, and others in “Queer Theory” emerged as a way of providing gays and lesbians with a common term around which to unite and a more radical way of critiquing stigmatization, choosing the derogatory name queer and transforming it into a slogan with pride (Rivkin and Ryan 677–78). Following Foucault, Queer Theorists view sexuality as disengaged from gender altogether and from the binary opposition of male/female.

Queer Theory in particular has been involved in the so-called culture wars in academia, as such postmodern concepts as gender ambivalence, ambiguity, and multiplicity of identities have replaced the more clearly defined sexual values of earlier generations. The controversy over the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe in the early 1990s illustrates the intensity of conflicts that arise when a gay male aesthetic is deployed.

In Epistemology of the Closet, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick deconstructs the pathology of the homosexual and argues that sexuality is “an array of acts, expectations, narratives, pleasures, identity-formations, and knowledges . . .” (22–27). Using Sedgwick as a starting point, Queer Theorists have sought to create publics that “can afford sex and intimacy in sustained, unchastening ways,” as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner write in a special issue of PMLA devoted to Queer Theory. A “queer public” includes self-identified gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and the transgendered. At the same time, this public has “different understandings of membership at different times.” The word queer was chosen both because of its shock value and because of its playfulness, its “wrenching sense of recontextualization” (343–45).

With a commitment only to pleasure, “queer” rejects the conventions of Western sexual mores. This rejection resembles the late nineteenth-century aesthete’s embrace of the notion of “art for art’s sake.” (Indeed late nineteenth-century figures such as Oscar Wilde are important sources for Queer Theory.) Instead, the queer celebrates desire, what Donald Morton calls “the unruly and uncontrollable excess that accompanies the production of meaning . . . The excess produced at the moment of the human subject’s entry into the codes and conventions of culture.” Desire is an autonomous entity outside history, “uncap-
urable” and “inexpressible.” Morton identifies Queer Theory’s roots in the anarchic skepticism of Friedrich Nietzsche (370–71). Queer commentary has produced analyses of such narrative features as “the pleasure of unruly subplots; vernacular idioms and private knowledge; voicing strategies; gossip; elision and euphemism; jokes; identification and other readerly reactions to texts and discourse” (Berlant and Warner 345–49).

They read the normless Internet as “queer” because it is unpredictable and endlessly transforming. Critics such as Alan Sinfield have offered startling new readings of Shakespeare, while others have returned to such homosexual writers as Walt Whitman with better clues as to embedded sexual meanings and the role of desire in reading the text. Increasingly in the last few years, gay characters, themes, and programs now appear on all major television channels and are the subjects of Hollywood films. Gay marriage remains in the headlines as a controversial issue, but it seems clear that the queer or gay aesthetic has fully entered mainstream American culture.

IV. FEMINISMS IN PRACTICE

A. The Marble Vault: The Mistress in “To His Coy Mistress”

Addressing himself to a coy or putatively unwilling woman, the speaker in Andrew Marvell’s poem pleads for sex using the logical argument that since they have not “world enough, and time” to delay pleasure, the couple should proceed with haste. But the poem’s supposed logic and its borrowing from traditional love poetry only thinly veil darker psychosexual matters. What is most arresting about the address is its shocking attack upon the female body.

The woman in “To His Coy Mistress” not only is unwilling to accept the speaker, but also is obviously quite intelligent; otherwise, he would not bother with such high-flown metaphysics. Yet the speaker seeks to frighten her into sexual compliance when his fancy philosophy does not seem persuasive enough. His use of such force is clearest in his violent and grotesque descriptions of her body.

Her body is indeed the focus, not his nor theirs together. Following a series of exotic settings and references to times past and present, the speaker offers the traditional adoration of the female body derived from the Petrarchan sonnet, but he effectively dismembers her identity into discrete sexual objects, including her eyes, her forehead, her breasts, “the rest” and “every part,” culminating in a wish for her to “show” her heart. (Such maneuvers remind us of Freud’s and Lacan’s discussions of the Oedipal male’s objectification of the mother.) This last image, showing the heart, moves in the direction of more invasive probing of her body and soul.

In the center of the poem the lady’s body is next compared to a “marble vault.” The speaker’s problem is that despite the woman’s charms, her vault is coldly closed to him. He deftly uses the refusal as a means to advance his assault, however, since the word vault (a tomb) points toward her death (not his, however). He clinches the attack with the next image, the most horrifying one in the poem. If she refuses him, “then worms shall try / That long preserved virginity.”

Returning to more traditional overtures, the speaker praises her “youthful hue” and dewy skin, from which, through “every pore,” he urges her “willing soul” to catch fire. These pores though minute are more openings into her body; the connection with penetrating worms from the lines before is in the wish to ignite her very soul. Attack upon the woman as fortress and the use of fire to suggest arousal were common tropes in sixteenth-century love sonnets, but Marvell’s adaptation of them has a grotesque, literal feel more aligned with seventeenth-century Metaphysical poems, with their strange juxtapositions. The speaker’s violence at the woman is, however, expanded to include himself, when he envisions the two of them as “amorous birds of prey” who may “devour” time, not “languish in his slow-chapped power” (“to chap” meaning “to chew”). It is significant that he does not foresee his own body moldering in the tomb, like hers, invaded by worms; he does admit that one day his lust will be turned to ashes, but that is a very different image from worms. He does not seem to see himself paying the same penalties that she will. The closing vision of how they will “tear our pleasures with rough strife / Thorough the iron gates of life” returns to the language of assault on her body. All in all, the lady of the poem is subject to being torn/opened up, or devoured by her admirer. Perhaps a deep irony resides in the fact that he is absolutely right in suggesting she will pay more penalties for sex than he will.
erated by feminism from its earliest days will continue to inspire new adaptations by women and men entering the new millennium of literary investigations in feminisms, gender studies, and elsewhere.

QUICK REFERENCE


Smith, Johanna M. "Cooped Up” with “Sad Trash”: Domesticity and the Sciences in Frankenstein." In Smith.


9

Cultural Studies

I. WHAT IS (OR ARE) “CULTURAL STUDIES”?

A college class on the American novel is reading Alice Walker’s The Color Purple (1982). The professor identifies African American literary and cultural sources and describes the book’s multilayered narrative structure, moving on to a brief review of its feminist critique of American gender and racial attitudes. Students and professor discuss these various approaches, analyzing key passages in the novel.

A student raises her hand and recalls that the Steven Spielberg film version (1985) drew angry responses from many African American viewers. The discussion takes off: Did Alice Walker “betray” African Americans with her harsh depiction of black men? Did Spielberg enhance this feature of the book or play it down? Another hand goes up: “But she was promoting lesbianism.” “Spielberg really played that down!” the professor replies.

A contentious voice in the back of the room: “Well, I just want to know what a serious film was doing with Oprah Winfrey in it.” This is quickly answered by another student, “Dude, she does have a book club on her show!” Class members respond to these points, examining interrelationships among race, gender, popular culture, the media, and literature. They question cultural conventions—both historical and contemporary—that operate within novels, on The Oprah Winfrey Show, in