Introduction

Gill Plain and Susan Sellers

The impact of feminism on literary criticism over the past thirty-five years has been profound and wide-ranging. It has transformed the academic study of literary texts, fundamentally altering the canon of what is taught and setting a new agenda for analysis, as well as radically influencing the parallel processes of publishing, reviewing and literary reception. A host of related disciplines have been affected by feminist literary enquiry, including linguistics, philosophy, history, religious studies, sociology, anthropology, film and media studies, cultural studies, musicology, geography, economics and law.

Why is it, then, that the term feminist continues to provoke such ambivalent responses? It is as if the very success of the feminist project has resulted in a curious case of amnesia, as women within and without the academy forget the debt they owe to a critical and political project that undid the hegemony of universal man. The result of this amnesia is a tension in contemporary criticism between the power of feminism and its increasing spectrality. Journalists and commentators write of 'post-feminism', as if to suggest that the need to challenge patriarchal power or to analyse the complexities of gendered subjectivities had suddenly gone away, and as if texts were no longer the products of material realities in which bodies are shaped and categorised not only by gender, but by class, race, religion and sexuality. This is not a 'post-feminist' history that marks the passing of an era, but rather a 'still-feminist' one that aims to explore exactly what feminist criticism has done and is doing from the medieval era to the present. It is a history that both records and appraises, examining the impact of ideas in their original contexts and their ongoing significance for a new generation of students and researchers. Above all, *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* regards the feminist critical project as a vital

dimension of literary studies, and it aims to provide an accessible introduction to this vast and vibrant field.

DEFINING FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

Feminist literary criticism properly begins in the aftermath of 'second-wave' feminism, the term usually given to the emergence of women's movements in the United States and Europe during the Civil Rights campaigns of the 1960s. Clearly, though, a feminist literary criticism did not emerge fully formed from this moment. Rather, its eventual self-conscious expression was the culmination of centuries of women's writing, of women writing about women writing, and of women – and men – writing about women's minds, bodies, art and ideas. Woman, as Virginia Woolf observes in *A Room of One's Own*, her formative text of feminist literary criticism, is 'the most discussed animal in the universe' (1929/1977: 27).[1] Whether misogynist or emancipatory, the speculation excited by the concept of woman, let alone by actual women and their desires, created a rich history upon which second-wave feminism could be built. From the beginning feminist literary criticism was keen to uncover its own origins, seeking to establish traditions of women's writing and early 'feminist' thought to counter the unquestioning acceptance of 'man' and male genius as the norm. *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* thus begins by illustrating the remarkable 'protofeminist' writing that would eventually form the basis of modern feminist thought.

As the title of the book indicates, in this history of feminism our principal emphasis is on *literary* criticism and textuality. However, as the reader progresses through the volume, it will become clear that the boundaries between literature and politics, activism and the academy, are fluid and, consequently, can be difficult to determine. Although these blurred boundaries are frequently productive, we would argue that feminist literary criticism can be distinguished from feminist political activism and social theory. Most obviously, the difference lies in the dimension of textuality. From Carolyn Dinshaw's account of medieval symbolism, to Mary Eagleton's consideration of patriarchal critique, to Heather Love's analysis of queer bodies, debates around representation underpin all the chapters in this book. Across the centuries woman has been the subject of innumerable reconfigurations, and with every reinscription comes the necessity of re-reading. In the space of the text woman can be both defamed and defended, and it is here that the most persuasive possibilities can be found for imagining the future of the female subject.

USING *A HISTORY OF FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM*

The book is divided into three parts, each of which is prefaced by an introduction explaining the rationale behind the territory covered. The chapters themselves have been produced by experts in the diverse fields of feminist literary criticism, and have been written in an accessible manner to provide orientation in the subject area for the beginner. However, because each chapter has been freshly commissioned for this project, and the contributors asked to return to the original sources, the resulting essays do more than provide an overview – they also offer new insights into the material, its history, reception and ongoing relevance, and these new readings will be of interest to scholars working in all areas of literary practice. Feminist literary criticism is a field characterised by the extensive cross-fertilisation of ideas. A number of key thinkers and their essays will appear in different contexts, and it is important to acknowledge these productive overlaps. Texts such as Adrienne Rich's 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', Hélène Cixous' 'The Laugh of the Medusa' and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* did not simply influence one school of feminist thought, but rather resonated across the entire spectrum of critical activity. The index will guide readers to the multiple locations in which discussions of key thinkers, essays, articles and books can be found. We recommend reading 'across' the book as well as through it in order to experience the divergent, dissonant and challenging encounters that characterise the feminist enterprise.

Despite the battles and the bad press, feminist literary criticism is a source of pleasure, stimulation, confirmation, insight, self-affirmation, doubt, questioning and reappraisal: it has the potential to alter the way we see ourselves, others and the world. *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* is indebted to the many wonderful studies of women, gender and writing that have enriched our understanding of the potentialities of feminist enquiry. In looking afresh at this material we are both taking stock and embracing the emergence of new critical possibilities. Feminist literary criticism is a subject with a future and it deserves the considered reflection of a substantial history. We hope this volume will contribute to that process.

NOTE

1. Virginia Woolf (1929/1977), *A Room of One's Own*, London: Grafton.

PART I

Pioneers and protofeminism

Introduction to Part I

Gill Plain

The history of feminist literary criticism properly begins some forty or fifty years ago with the emergence of what is commonly termed second-wave feminism. The history of this critical movement and its impact on culture and society will be charted in the second and third parts of this volume, but it is important to recognise that this story has a prequel. To write of pioneers and protofeminism is to explore the diverse texts, voices and lives that articulated feminist ideas and feminist critical positions before such categories existed. Medieval women were not 'feminists' and they had few opportunities to be critics, but as Carolyn Dinshaw observes in the opening essay, 'texts affect lived lives, and . . . if women had relatively little opportunity to author texts, they nonetheless felt their effects' (Dinshaw, 15). The history of women's engagement with texts and textuality far exceeds the parameters of second-wave feminism, and this history is integral to contemporary understandings of feminist practice.

Yet the history of the representation of women, their writing, their reading and their literary critical acts would in total need not a single volume but a library of texts, and in consequence Part I of this book sets out a combination of overview and example that indicates the complexity of feminism's origins without attempting an exhaustive survey. The overview begins with the first two chapters, Carolyn Dinshaw's 'Medieval Feminist Criticism' and Helen Wilcox's 'Feminist Criticism in the Renaissance and Seventeenth Century', which together establish the conditions of pre-Enlightenment female subjectivity. These chapters illustrate that 'woman' was a site of intense literary and critical activity that examined the power of the feminine as symbol even as it worked to contain and constrain women in practice. For Dinshaw, the tension between literary embodiments and lived reality is at the heart of the often fraught debates that surrounded narrative practice. These debates in many cases prefigured the concerns of contemporary feminist enquiry, but ultimately Dinshaw concludes that 'medieval critical gestures' cannot straightforwardly be regarded

as 'protofeminism'. Nonetheless, there are important historical continuities that need to be acknowledged, and a recognition of the relationship between gender and textuality is integral to understanding the literature and culture of the medieval period, from Chaucer's iconic Wife of Bath to Margery Kempe's autobiographical acts of self-construction.

By the early modern period, however, it is possible to trace a significant shift in women's relationship to textual culture. Helen Wilcox observes that it is now possible to describe women as 'feminists', and to define a range of 'phenomena' that might be termed feminist literary criticism. Indeed, she argues that a woman writer could 'play the part of a protofeminist simply by virtue of her decision to write' (Wilcox, 31). This was a period in which 'continuing constraints as well as new freedoms' provoked 'an outburst of writing by women' (37), and although in general women's literacy levels remained low, they nonetheless acquired far greater visibility as both producers and consumers of texts. From pamphlets to poetry and from devotional literature to advice books, women became active participants in literary culture. Their position, however, was not uncontested, and Wilcox traces the dominant debates that circulated around women's character, her writing, her place in society and her relationship to the legacy of Eve. Drawing on a remarkable range of often anonymous publications, Wilcox finds a dynamic political engagement taking shape in women's licensed and unlicensed engagement with the practices of reading and writing.

Dinshaw and Wilcox together provide a crucial mapping of the often evasive and unexpected territory of women's textual encounters, and their work gives a clear indication of the historical embeddedness of literary critical practice. The remaining chapters of Part I, however, adopt a contrasting but supplementary approach. Across the historical expanse of the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many women could have stood as pioneers of 'protofeminism': writers and activists whose thinking, writing and 'living' challenged the tenets of patriarchal social organisation and questioned the prescriptive norms of gender. In Britain writers such as Mary Shelley, Maria Edgeworth, Charlotte Brontë, Mrs Gaskell and George Eliot produced unconventional texts – and in some cases lived unconventional lives – which have long since been recognised as prefiguring the concerns of later feminist enquiry. Similarly political 'feminist' activists from Frances Power Cobbe to Millicent Garrett Fawcett produced groundbreaking journalism, polemics and cultural criticism. Much of this work has slipped from view, but it stands as a pertinent reminder of the symbiotic relationship between feminist politics and textual practice.[1] Even the seemingly conventional Jane Austen can be seen as a

contributor to a history of pre-feminist writing, producing in *Northanger Abbey* (1803/1818) both a witty demonstration of the value of women's education and a powerful defence of that most 'female' of literary forms, the novel.

Fiction, then, was a crucial means through which women engaged with politics in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and in America too the literary and the political were inescapably intertwined. As Elaine Showalter has observed, 'there were few novels by English women in the nineteenth century as radical or outspoken with regard to the woman question as those by their American counterparts' (1991: 3): from Harriet Beecher Stowe to Louisa May Alcott, from Margaret Fuller to Sojourner Truth, American women wrote, articulated and embodied a discourse that acknowledged the agency and independence of the female subject. The plenitude of pioneers around the world continues into the *fin de siècle* and the early twentieth century. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Olive Schreiner and Winifred Holtby were just some of the influential writers whose textual practice was profoundly political and whose fictions constituted vital acts of cultural criticism, women who left a legacy of argument and ideas that would enrich the later practice of feminist literary criticism. Yet, from this wealth of women writers and early feminist activists, one woman stands out as exemplary. The influence of Mary Wollstonecraft on over two hundred years of feminist enquiry cannot be overstated, and Susan Manly's chapter offers a detailed analysis of Wollstonecraft as a literary critic and advocate of reason, who eloquently anticipated the concerns of second-wave feminism. At the heart of Wollstonecraft's work is an attack on the authority of Edmund Burke, John Milton and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'fellow authors of a fictitious femininity, and patriarchal enemies in league against female emancipation' (Manly, 49). Manly demonstrates the critical strategies through which Wollstonecraft exposed Burke's sentimental 'aestheticisation of beauty', Rousseau's construction of an ideal, objectified woman, and the flawed misogynistic construction of Milton's Eve. In her detailed readings of these texts, Wollstonecraft reveals herself adept at the deployment of what would later be termed feminist critique. But this is not the limit of her achievement. As Manly illustrates, Wollstonecraft also struggled to escape the confines of gendered subjectivity by exposing 'the fictionality of both femininity and masculinity' (50). Wollstonecraft's argument for the constructed nature of gender was a strategic one: if writing and thinking could demonstrably be seen to transcend the body, then there would be no argument for excluding women from the public sphere. Yet her eloquent exposure of gendered textuality makes more

than a transient political point: it also makes explicit the extent to which textual constructions shape subjectivities. Wollstonecraft viewed the woman writer as rational, ethical and humane, the antithesis of 'false sensibility' (49), an achievement which, over a century later, would see her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* acclaimed by Winifred Holtby as 'the bible of the women's movement in Great Britain' (1934: 41).

Manly's chapter traces the legacy of Wollstonecraft across the nineteenth century, exploring her often unacknowledged influence on writers from Maria Edgeworth to George Eliot. But it would not be until the twentieth century that another writer would leave a legacy of feminist thought and critical enquiry to rival that of Wollstonecraft. Our second 'pioneer', then, is Virginia Woolf, 'the founder of modern feminist literary criticism' (Goldman, 66). As Jane Goldman demonstrates, Woolf's groundbreaking essay *A Room of One's Own* constitutes a 'modern primer' for feminist criticism, and her influence on later generations of feminist thought has been immense. Woolf matters to feminist literary criticism not simply as a writer and critic, but also as a subject of critical enquiry. The rescuing of Woolf from the apolitical prisons of Bloomsbury and madness was one of the formative projects of second-wave feminist literary criticism (see Carr, Chapter 7), giving rise to a constructive relationship between the writer, her criticism and her critics. It is Woolf we must thank for the provocative concepts of thinking back through our mothers, the woman's sentence and the androgynous mind. It is Woolf who wrote of killing the angel in the house and demanded the adaptation of the book to the body. Goldman's chapter illustrates how, in Woolf's creative contradictions and her disruptive boundary-crossing imagination, we find sources for the many, often conflicting, theoretical positions of contemporary feminist thought.

Finally, Part I of this book examines the legacy of Simone de Beauvoir. Like Woolf, Beauvoir has left feminism with a rich lexicon of images and ideas, not least of which is her definitive assertion that 'one is not born a woman'. This concept is implicit in the work and debates surrounding all our protofeminists and pioneers, but in Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* this fundamental idea receives explicit articulation. As discussed in the general introduction, the recognition of the social construction of gender and the coercive nature of gendered subjectivities has been at the centre of feminist literary criticism, enabling it as a discourse to challenge humanist assumptions about identity, nature and progress, and to scrutinise the potent mythical formations of femininity and masculinity. From Kate Millett to Judith Butler, feminist critics have been inspired by Beauvoir, but, as Elizabeth Fallaize argues, the full substance of her monumental work is

hardly known. Since the 1990s, a new generation of feminist literary critics have been working to revise the limited perceptions of Beauvoir's work, and Fallaize contributes to this vital process through a study of Beauvoir's analysis of myth. Myth, claimed Beauvoir, was instrumental in 'persuading women of the *naturalness* of their fate', and Fallaize traces her examination of feminine archetypes from Stendhal to Sade, in the process finding an ecumenical methodology that anticipates later literary-critical movements from Marxism to structuralism to psychoanalysis. *The Second Sex* prefaces the point at which *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* more obviously begins and, as with Wollstonecraft and Woolf, the echoes of Beauvoir's influence will resonate throughout its pages.

NOTE

1. See Barbara Caine (1997), *English Feminism 1780–1980*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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CHAPTER 1

Medieval feminist criticism

Carolyn Dinshaw

MEDIEVAL FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM?

Was there such a thing as feminist literary criticism in the Middle Ages? Given that 'feminism' is the ideology of a modern social movement for the advancement of women, taking shape (in its Western European and US forms) in the eighteenth century and based on principles of equality and emancipation in secular societies, it could not have been known in, say, late fourteenth-century England in the forms in which it is known in the United States or Britain today – to say the very least. Moreover, given that 'literary criticism' is as well a modern invention, in English dating back to perhaps Alexander Pope, perhaps John Dryden, perhaps Sir Philip Sidney, it is hard to say what relation 'medieval critical attitudes' (Copeland, 1994: 500) might have to literary criticism – especially in its postmodern, feminist form in which the modernist pretence of analytical objectivity is abandoned for an ideologically based and politically committed project.

Yet writers in the late Middle Ages did reflect on the activities of reading, interpreting and writing, in a vigorous commentary tradition in Latin and a vibrant vernacular literary practice as well as in the prescriptive tradition of Latin rhetorical *artes*.[1] Since originality was not the sine qua non of literature that it later became – a main priority of medieval thought was to articulate a tradition – a great deal of late medieval writing can be seen in fact to be rewriting. As Chaucer retells the *Aeneid*, for example, in his *House of Fame* and *Legend of Good Women*, or translates Boccaccio's *Filostrato* in *Troilus and Criseyde*, his literary acts are first and foremost literary critical acts. Criticism here is not separate from creation, but is rather built into the creative process; in this way, medieval writing has much in common with postmodern notions of writing and criticism (Allen and Axiotis, 1997). Moreover, the fact that postmodern literary practices like feminist critique are ideologically based does not only distance them from medieval ones but joins them as well (Minnis and Scott, 1988: ix): if writers of the Christian