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0521558190 - Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture: Emerging Subjects

Edited by Valerie Traub, M. Lindsay Kaplan and Dympna Callaghan

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

*Introduction**Valerie Traub, M. Lindsay Kaplan and Dympna Callaghan*

Sofonisba Anguissola's self-portrait, reproduced in the frontispiece of this book, depicts the artist flourishing her brush in a self-conscious articulation of professional identity. As the first Italian woman to gain international recognition as a painter, Anguissola's gesture of self-definition, her apparently confident assertion of identity as a Renaissance artist, also betrays the alienation of women in general from the privileged cultural identity of the humanist subject. Anguissola was celebrated as a novelty, and only as such could she successfully evade the censure and suppression that befell other talented women, such as Lavinia Fontana and Fede Galizia, who strived to emulate her.¹

Feminist readings of early modern culture: emerging subjects explores the multiple ways that subjects were constructed within the highly contested terms of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century culture. As such, the essays in this volume implicitly enter into a dialogue initiated by scholars who have argued that the modern subject was "invented" in the early modern period.² The influence of this claim in the field of early modern studies has been enormous, contributing to the rise of distinct movements and methodologies (cultural materialism, new historicism) which have interacted and conflicted with related critical projects, such as feminism. In the past, however, histories of the subject have rarely been specifically concerned with gender, while feminist work on gender has only minimally taken up, in historical terms, the claim of a new subjectivity.³ Because the essays in our volume are centrally engaged with the production of gendered subjects, this Introduction begins with a brief description of the discourses that have informed the conceptual possibility of this book.

In response to the so-called "Renaissance birth of the subject," David Aers and Lee Patterson have pointed out that various forms of interiority preexisted the social transformations of the sixteenth century.⁴ If Aers and Patterson overstate the case by privileging articulations from a

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single discourse, theology, over all others, they nonetheless persuasively argue that claims to the modernity of the Renaissance subject have depended in large part upon an ahistorical othering of the medieval period. What's more, they suggest the practical futility, and conservatism, of the search for an originary moment, a search that tends to unify artificially historical periods, and, we would add, individual subjectivities.

We – the editors of this volume – would like to suggest that it is less that the modern subject *came into being* in the early modern period than that the terms of the subject's intelligibility were reconfigured during two hundred years of economic, political, epistemological, and social upheaval.⁵ Rather than police the boundaries between premodern, early modern, modern, and postmodern, we wish to pursue the specificity of representation and experience as they are constituted in particular moments in time and space. By replacing ontological claims with more deliberately historical ones, we hope to underscore the point that the subject, in both social and psychological terms, is always in the process of emerging; such an emergence is never whole or complete. And in focusing on the subject as gendered, we echo Judith Butler's assertion that "[t]o claim that the subject is itself produced in and as a gendered matrix of relations is not to do away with the subject, but only to ask after the conditions of its emergence and operation."⁶ At the same time, we maintain that philosophical critiques such as Butler's must be augmented by a historical specification of the local matrices through which the defining terms of individual subjects emerged. That which signifies the subject's emergence takes place within the highly contested terms of cultural struggle. Thus, different subjects are marked differently: like Sofonisba Anguissola, they may or may not be accorded interiority, agency, and status; like her as well, they can make claims for cultural recognition only through available means. At the same time that we stress the historicity of the subject, we also emphasize the psychodynamics of cultural fantasy and projection, for in psychoanalytic terms, as Alan Sinfield argues, "the human subject is never full, and hence may, at any moment, appear unformed."⁷

The subject's ongoing struggle for emergence in the early modern period influences, and is influenced by, similarly complicated and contradictory transformations in a range of cultural domains: economic, national, familial, religious, and scientific. The move from an agrarian economy to market relations in a national system of exchange created a bourgeois class of urban dwellers, many of whom were cut off

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from traditional networks of kin and community. With the decline of face-to-face exchanges in a marketplace designated by a cross, economic relations for a greater number of people became increasingly abstract. Buyers and sellers increasingly were separated by time and distance, and the self-understanding required to enter into this system of transaction was different from that fostered by the immediacy of bargaining in a pre-capitalist market economy.⁸ During the same period, Tudor and Stuart efforts to consolidate the nationalist state not only initiated the centralization of power, but began to fashion subjects with a simultaneously more direct and more conflictual relation to the crown. Concurrent with this development of the state as *patria* was the deployment of the familial model as the defining relation between ruler and subject and an emphasis on the family as the elemental governing unit.⁹ The inculcation of this ideology attempted to foster obedience while conferring a sense of the importance of social responsibility, hence serving to pull individual members of the polity into closer relation to the state.

If the ruler was imaged as a parent, the parent was also given the rights and responsibilities of a ruler. In order for the subject to enact the monarch's will, he or she required a measure of authority in his or her own right. While husbands officially had rule over wives, both parents had rule over other members of the household, such as children and servants, male and female. Thus, the analogy of state to family effected the structural subordination of its subjects while it simultaneously imparted to (at least some of) them a measure of authority.

The advent of the religious movements we unify under the rubric of the Reformation contributed to this contradictory development by stressing obedience to consolidated secular and sacred authorities in the Church of England, while also developing a more activist role for individual conscience which could justify resistance to these authorities. As A. G. Dickens indicates, the Elizabethan settlement not only gratified "the general demand for a centralized Church coterminous with the nation, [but] also left room for some real divergences of outlook."¹⁰ Protestant ideology provided a cohering function for the English state, as it asserted the state's divine imperative for intervention in the religious struggles on the continent, even as Puritan emphasis on conscience and personal agency in salvation authorized the radical dissent which threatened to divide England during the civil war.

The results of, and further impetus to, nation building were the mercantile and imperialist ventures that would lead to the subjugation of various peoples around the globe. Diverse as individual travelers'

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responses to the New World may have been,¹¹ the quest for national identity depended upon the construction of native peoples as radically different from Europeans, with tropes of exoticism and deficiency – cultural, intellectual, and moral – increasingly becoming privileged as the governing terms of national otherness. Such colonialist projects helped to further, and were furthered by, the new science. Advances in astronomy, optics, and anatomy pushed the scientist's gaze not only outward to the stars and inward to the body's viscera, but across the ocean to peoples inhabiting different climes. Travel, exploration, and colonization were reconfigured through scientific discourses.

The reorganization of scientific knowledge was mirrored in the formalization of a more internalized mode of behavior, as protocols of bodily decorum began to produce the subject as increasingly “civilized.”¹² New textual genres (conduct books, pedagogical manuals) and material objects and technologies (forks, handkerchiefs, privies) began to intervene in the body's contact with itself. This “civilized body” was constituted out of, and carried with it, transformed relations of class and politics, property and privacy.¹³ Hence, just as the subject emerged as an increasingly bounded, private self, various social mechanisms arose which also compelled its subjection.

If, over the course of this period, multiple cultural projects were initiated which formed the conditions of possibility for a recognizably modern subject, some of these projects were mundane while others were spectacular in their emergence. The terms of gender were reconfigured over the course of two centuries, sometimes subtly in the diurnal round of domestic relations, and sometimes dramatically, as in the instance of witch persecutions. That the terms of gender were a matter of intense social debate is evinced by the range of domains in which gender struggle was played out – village ritual, stage plays, conduct books, broadsides, pamphlet wars, and law courts. In light of such multiple and ongoing struggles, we maintain that the subject is always, although not essentially, gendered at any given historical moment. Because of its provisional and contradictory nature, gender itself continually must be reproduced. Through this expenditure of cultural energy, the terms of gender change over time. We thus reject the now prevalent argument, based on the theory of physiological homology between the sexes, that there existed only one gender in early modern culture.¹⁴ Rather, gender exists as a term of definition even when it is not specifically articulated; it operates according to the exigencies of various discursive domains, and relates to and interacts with other axes of social formation.

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The essays in *Feminist readings of early modern culture* plot specific rubrics through which gendered subjects gained cultural intelligibility. The focus is less on inwardness per se (although several contributors discuss the production of interiority), than on the psychic and material technologies, the disciplines and discourses, through which subjects became invested with various modes of signification, a range of material embodiments, and new forms of authority. The social conditions through which subjectivities accrued meaning in terms of gender, race, sexuality, class – and through which they were othered, oppressed, or empowered – include a wide spectrum of cultural events: humanism, technology, science, anatomy, literacy, domesticity, colonialism, erotic practices, the theater and its audience. In order to gain access to these phenomena, our contributors have read and analyzed a broad range of texts: cookbooks, marriage manuals, popular pamphlets, legal depositions, anatomy books, visual arts, theological, and political treatises, and stageplays.

Analysis of this variety of texts makes clear that during the early modern period, various frames of reference and diverse kinds of knowledges – popular, domestic, theatrical, legal, scientific, medical, moral – constituted the terms of subjectivity in distinct and differing ways. Whereas much of the influential scholarship of the past fifteen years has derived its claims about the subject (and, by extension, interiority, subjugation, and agency) from the evidence of only one discursive domain – whether philosophy or medical texts¹⁵ – we believe that processes of interpellation are variable and often at odds. Thus, we strive in this collection to delineate the possibility of multiple agencies, specifiable within discrete historical moments and according to the logics of various discourses and localities. The point in drawing from diverse materials is not merely to render more visible and varied the *histories* of early modern subjects, but to provide a *critique* of modes of subjectivity.

In recognizing the span of time that separates our own situation from that of early modern subjects, we seek to maintain a recognition of the past's alterity while specifying the resonances that exist between early modern and postmodern cultures. As Margaret Hunt has pointed out:

The European Renaissance presents us with a series of societies sufficiently different from our own as to destabilize a number of received assumptions about, among other things, gender, sexuality, politics, religion, language, and identity. Yet it is also a period to which twentieth-century people almost reflexively appeal when they wish to validate whatever passes at any given time for “mainstream values.”¹⁶

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In resisting this conservative recourse to the early modern period, we insist on the status of “the Renaissance” as a nineteenth-century, retrospectively painted portrait. As a legitimating apparatus, “the Renaissance” offers the illusion of a totalized historical period coextensive with objective truth. In contrast, we underscore its dependence upon various exclusions and misrecognitions: of the experience of women and the laboring poor, of important events in Islamic and Jewish culture, and of colonialism in the New World. Such exclusions have important ramifications for the historical production of the subject, as Hunt suggests:

The classical, Renaissance, and early modern antecedents of what came to constitute a modern “identity” included a self-affirming public voice (often called “citizenship”), an identification with a vocation (e.g., he is a carpenter), personal autonomy, standardly defined in the Renaissance and early modern period as the ability to deploy the labor, reproductive and otherwise, of inferior family members . . . and some measure of bodily self-control, a central attribute of which was the ability to initiate and to definitively refuse sexual intercourse. All of these were difficult or impossible to attain for married women, slaves, or servants (and these categories cover the overwhelming majority of all women), and most were ontologically incompatible with what a married woman, a slave, or a servant “was.”¹⁷

As several of the following essays imply, however, the absence of investment in a fully articulated, coherent subject may have allowed for the establishment of subcommunities, pockets of resistance, and alliances between subordinated groups. In this regard, it is important to look for resistance in relative terms, rather than to hold early modern women’s words and actions up to post-Enlightenment standards of subjective self-consciousness. The condition of a fragmented, diffuse subject makes possible certain challenges to the dominant culture that may not be possible in modernity. For instance, the political status of the family, while reinforcing the subordination of the wife, nevertheless offers women a public role and a proximity to power that is lost in the transformation of the domestic into a private sphere in the eighteenth century.

In hoping simultaneously to mark and bridge the divide between the early modern and the postmodern, we recognize that the past has much of relevance to say because we see the shadows of our own images there. More importantly, we want to resist rewriting the early modern past from the perspective of the Enlightenment. The disfigurements of Enlightenment subjectivity that characterize the postmodern era seem

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to resemble more closely the emerging subjects of early modernity than does the putatively coherent, unified Enlightenment subject who lived in closer historical proximity to our own time.

According to Joyce Chaplin, the term “modern” first was used during the period we call “early modern” to connote distance from the earlier medieval period: “It was derived from the Latin word *hodie*, meaning day. *Hodiern* meant daily, up to date, the way we live now; it is from *hodiern* that the English got the word ‘modern’ by the early 1500s.”¹⁸ To employ the term “early modern” delineates a tension between “us” and “not us”: if the postmodern marks a crisis of modernity, the early modern marks the moment when we begin to see the issues of modernity developing. Without asserting that there was a full-blown Enlightenment subject in the sixteenth century or that there was nothing recognizably modern in the medieval subject, we can recognize that the early modern and the postmodern are similar in part because of their transitional status. Despite important differences in the organization of economic and social activity, there remains in certain domains a provocative sense of resemblance between these periods: witness the recent reclamation of “queer” sexuality as coextensive with the dominant terms of Renaissance culture.¹⁹ At the same time, each era has a historical integrity of its own, and focusing only on similarity distorts our understanding of the past. The point is to ask, why the resemblance in one locale and not another?

The dialogue we have staged between early modern and postmodern correlates with our sense of feminism as a dialogic mode of interaction. In response to the effective exclusion of certain women from the predominately white, middle class women’s movement – particularly lesbians, sex radicals, women of color, and working-class women – feminism over the last decade increasingly has confronted the possibility and necessity of its own diversity. Through this confrontation, feminists have begun to recognize – if not yet to adequately deal with – the dangers implicit in any univocal assertions in the name of “woman”. Beyond that, feminists have recognized that feminism was in its inception founded upon exclusions, particularly in regard to race and class, and that this history has important ramifications for current praxis. It is no historical accident that feminism as a liberal doctrine of equality and rights developed contemporaneously with European imperialism, the slave trade, and full fledged capitalism. Feminism (which unlike earlier defenses of women claimed that the female subject had individual rights) was produced and conditioned by the extensibility of the Enlightenment

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subject, “Man,” which was assumed to represent us all. As Laura Brown recently has asked, “how can we use a feminism that comes out of imperialism?”²⁰ The answer, we believe, involves remaining aware of the histories from which we – as subjects, as feminists – emerged, an awareness that can be maintained only by continuing a genealogical critique of the conditions of the subject’s production, as well as an ongoing resistance to that history. In returning to the period which generated the conditions of possibility for both modern feminism and modern anti-feminism, we hope to reconfigure the possibilities of feminism’s future. As Denise Albanese asserts in her essay in this volume which analyzes Cindy Sherman’s postmodern engagements with the early modern visual past: “In showing how that past was made, they also show how it can be made different.”

Part of this process of reconfiguration began when feminist criticism and theory disavowed a “seventies” conception of sisterhood because of its erasure of differences of race, class, and sexuality. However, in doing so, feminist inquiry also abandoned some of the valuable utopian dimensions of feminist praxis which had built on notions of comradeship and solidarity from other leftist enterprises. Believing that the variability of feminist theory and practice depends upon the articulation and interaction of divergent points of view, different methodological choices, and conflicting critical positions, we have envisioned this volume as an ongoing dialogue – among the editors, among the contributors, and between ourselves and our readers. In highlighting the differences between our positions, we are less interested in representing a plurality of possible personal and institutional locations than in registering our status as a collective with a diverse feminist identity. We emphasize the distinction between plurality and collectivity because the former reproduces the very conception of representation inherited from the Enlightenment from which we want to depart, while the latter articulates an oppositional stance relying neither on a permanent group identity nor the erasure of difference. For, while we emphasize the importance of engaging with our differences, we also recognize the strategic importance of consolidating feminist positions. We reject the proposition that we live in a postfeminist age; rather, we believe that it is vital that we not underestimate the power and tenacity of dominant patriarchal structures. Indeed, we emphasize our differences because we also acknowledge the extraordinary flexibility of the dominant ideology and its ability to recuperate radical concepts and practices.

Our dialogic stance is impelled by two additional motives: on the one

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hand, feminist literary critics and cultural historians mistakenly are assumed by the non-feminist institution to be a single unified school, rather than to represent a spectrum of politics, perspectives, and methodologies. On the other hand, feminist demands for theoretical and methodological unity and consistency, and critical squabbles over the form that unity should take, have served to undermine the political project that feminist scholarship allegedly serves. Our attempt to enact a “nineties” feminist mode of intellectual engagement has much to do with our desire for a positive alternative to an unproductive mode of intellectual interaction prevalent in the United States academy, where scholars offer critiques of others’ work more out of a desire to assert their own institutional presence than to contribute to collective inquiry.

Beyond a commitment to an inclusive yet conflictual feminism, this anthology resists advocating for a single method. This is not to suggest that collections organized around a methodological school do not have important roles to play, particularly at foundational moments of a critical project. Rather, the variety of methodological options evident in this volume furthers the understanding that critical categories can obscure those interests, goals, and methods that can draw different critics together. We reject the artificial limit such divisions put on our interactions – in the assumptions, for instance, that straight women shouldn’t criticize the work of queer theorists or that lesbians are not interested in what heterosexual feminists have to say; that materialist critics have no interest in psychoanalysis or that psychoanalytic critics have nothing to offer to historical criticism; that new historicists necessarily lack in materialist consciousness or that materialists are overly preoccupied with a totalizing hegemony. Over the course of our scholarly relationships, we recognize that it has been the differences among us that have most fostered our own interpretive practices. Our attempt to foreground, rather than hide, such dissonance promotes a feminism that is as alert to concrete differences in practice as it is to “difference” as a fashionable mode of theory. The “emerging subjects” of our subtitle thus simultaneously refers to the early modern reconfiguration of subjectivities along increasingly salient axes of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class, and of a contemporary mode of feminist conversation that not only confounds and reconfigures critical boundaries, but exists in continuing dialogic interaction with itself and others.

In an anthology there is a strong temptation to demonstrate not only connections among essays, but also to stress the existence of the volume’s coherence and unity. In a dialogic enterprise such as ours, however, such

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an effort also can be disingenuous. Because we believe that the conflicts between, as much as the intersections among, contributors comprise much of the value of this volume, we resist the temptation to invent a homogenous voice to introduce our work. When we speak of “we,” then, we implicitly signal differences as well as our common goals, hoping to invoke not a unified single voice, but an internally conflicted, multiple agency.

In addition to variously defined feminist commitment, the contributors do share an interest in the mutual importance of textuality and history, history and theory. The essays in this volume assume that whereas historical precision must not be sacrificed for theoretical flashiness, historical analysis without theoretical rigor obscures rather than reveals our investments in the past. History is not composed of inert empirical data to be recovered from the archive or the literary text, but is rather a dynamic, complex process that serves (consciously or otherwise) the political needs of the present. The relationship between history and theory in this volume is mutually illuminating: critical theory of various kinds, whether or not explicitly signposted, helps to foreground the difficulties inherent in the project of historicization, while attention to historical events provides the necessary grounding for theoretical speculation.

Many of the essays call into question putative divisions among analytical categories or methodological approaches. Several of them fall within the syncretic, internally conflicted domain of what Laura Brown has called the “new new historicis[m],” taking up “issues of gender and race, feminism and colonialism, working-class culture and male and female homosexual desire.”²¹ The work included here focuses on the interrelated cultural production of marginalized and dominant identities in order to gain greater analytical purchase on those social processes that foster complicity with dominant structures and those that enable resistance. If the underlying method of this work is careful exposure of forces of social constraint, the end is a refigured political agency. All of the essays address some aspect of emergent female subjectivity. Whereas a number focus on early modern women, others, less predictably, treat masculinity, the nation, and the body as a site of material inscription that is diacritically related to femininity.

The structure of the volume follows a trajectory in which various concerns anticipate, overlap, and extend one another; the essays map out through physical proximity certain arenas of interest, intersection, and conflict. Situating essays in a paratactic manner, we offer a structure in which points of conceptual intersection enable the articulation of multi-