

## Preface

*Reading Woman* began as a collection of feminist literary criticism focusing on texts by women writers. As it evolved, it became not just a book of feminist readings, but a book about both “reading” and “woman”—whether as reader, as writer, or as read; and especially as represented in and by Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. In their different ways, all the essays included address both the question of feminist reading and the related (for me, inseparable) question of reading “woman” as a figure for sexual difference. They are also linked by a preoccupation with the relation between women and theory, especially (but not only) psychoanalytic theory. What is the status and function of “woman” in the Freudian text? And what is the status and function of theory within feminist criticism? Feminist readings of writing by and about women—concerned with the representation of women, and with the relation between reading, writing, and sexual difference—intersect here with readings of feminist theory itself.

To position myself as a feminist critic, both geographically and intellectually, it seems worth saying that in 1980 I moved from England to the United States. One effect of that move, paradoxically, was to take me closer to France. Recent Anglo-American feminist criticism has been invigorated, often transformed, by its encounter with French feminism, particularly psychoanalytic feminism. The essays included in this book are no exception. For me at least, existing literary and feminist concerns have often been radically reformulated in the light of writings by (and about) Hélène Cixous, Sarah Kofman, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray—to name only the best known—as well as by the interpretative writings in England of Lacanian feminists such as Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose;

or, in the United States, Jane Gallop and Shoshana Felman. It is scarcely possible to write feminist literary criticism in the 1980s without acknowledging the influence of critics, theorists, and mediators such as these, whether French or Franco-feminist. Their work, it seems to me, has significantly changed the scope, method, and assumptions of Anglo-American criticism since its first new wave over a decade ago.

My own feminist literary criticism began in the early 1970s in the wake of writing by Mary Ellmann and Kate Millett, at a time when feminist literary criticism, however energetic, was relatively untheoretical in its critique of literature and of the assumptions governing conventional criticism. Such criticism attempted to shift the ground, to place the accent elsewhere, to expose the interestedness of phallocriticism, and to privilege the writing, perspective, and experience of women. Elaine Showalter later called this attempt "gynocritics." In the course of rereading my own previously published essays for inclusion in this book, it became clear to me that the significant break for many feminist critics, and certainly for myself, occurred as a result of the intellectual and political influence of French feminist thinking from the mid-1970s on. For that reason, I have chosen not to include anything written before 1978. As in criticism generally, French theory (structuralist, post-structuralist, deconstructive, and psychoanalytic) has infiltrated and often polarized feminist literary criticism. The theoretical transformation which has taken place in feminist criticism during the past five years or so is particularly associated with two connected, ongoing feminist "projects": that of bringing the insights of psychoanalysis to bear in a feminist context, and that of bringing a feminist critique to bear on psychoanalysis. My own writing has been, and continues to be, shaped by this double project, as well as by the impact of literary theory on feminist criticism (and vice versa).

A second major impetus in contemporary feminist literary criticism has come from teaching. Here too, my own writing has been stimulated and transformed by the opportunity to teach in a flourishing women's studies program and by the energy and insights of the feminist criticism to which women's studies have given rise. In America at least, the insti-

tutional acceptance and funding of women's studies programs and courses (however precarious or embattled) have allowed a generation of teachers and students to teach and study in ways that reflect the feminist critique of traditional concepts of literary curricula and the literary canon. One consequence has been the growing impact of feminist theory and criticism on the institution of literary criticism itself. These gains are now increasingly under threat in the United States from a government intent on imposing its ideology not only on women, the family, and on sexual and racial issues, but also on the reproduction of teaching, learning, and culture both within and outside universities. Feminist criticism in a multiplicity of disciplines (and interdisciplines) represents a sustained and vocal alternative to this ideology and is by now surely—I hope—too well established, if only in an academic context, to go away quietly if conservative views of the role of the humanities prevail. The attempt to belittle or deny the intellectual significance and achievement of both women's studies and black studies is an alarming aspect of reactions to the transforming effect within universities of courses and programs set up during the past decade. Such courses have done more than provide the context for feminist criticism; they have been crucial for the political, sexual, and racial awareness of an entire generation of students.

In the wake of this political and educational backlash, feminist anxiety about the masculine appropriation of feminist studies within the academy, and especially within literary criticism, seems—however well founded—relatively unimportant. Nonetheless, it is an irony that the very impact of feminist criticism on the institution of literary criticism and theory risks turning feminism into yet another ingredient in the existing mix or plurality, rather than constituting a critique of that pluralized, universalizing melange itself. Literary study has been, and continues to be, fundamentally challenged by and increasingly responsive to the concerns of the women's movement and the impact of women's studies, as well as the critique produced by feminist literary criticism. Appropriation of that critique, rather than recognition of its implications for critical practice, risks not simply diluting it, but silencing it. This is not

to say that one has to be female in order to write feminist criticism; but no one, I think, can afford to become involved in the debate and practice of feminist criticism without confronting the implications for their own critical position of that debate, that practice. Whether feminist or not, critics can't avoid situating themselves (and being situated) in relation to the feminist literary criticism and theory they speak for or about. Though it says much for the state of feminist literary criticism that accounts of contemporary critical theory can no longer ignore a feminist critique, these accounts themselves—by standing outside feminist critical debate—risk seeming immune to it. One function of feminist criticism is to put that immunity in question.

My own criticism has been enabled by the existence of a community of Anglo- and Franco-American feminist critics, by now too large and disparate to be represented by selected names. This book is intended as a contribution to a dialogue within feminist literary criticism itself. The position I've chosen to take, though often responding to the pioneering writing in the 1970s of feminist literary critics, "herstorians," and interpreters such as Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, seems (to me at least) to be an argument with and against the finally untheorized, experiential, and literary-herstorical tendency of much feminist criticism in the United States. For some, it may seem that my own writing is insufficiently rooted in history, whether from a traditional or from a Marxist point of view. The alert feminist reader will also see that the criticism in this collection, as well as reflecting only certain aspects of feminist literary study, focuses in detail on a select group of writers. Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Virginia Woolf are hardly forgotten or neglected woman writers; nor can Freud, whose texts would continue to engage me for their literary interest alone, be considered an underexposed author today. But while choosing to write about the major formative influences on a particular feminist literary context—my own—or on a major formative influence on "theory" as that term is currently understood, I have tried to raise theoretical questions that are relevant to other feminist concerns,

other feminisms. These writers and these questions are the ones that preoccupy me, even (as it must seem to some) at the cost of excluding less well-known writing by women, whether from the same or from other contexts; or at the cost of refusing other questions of major feminist concern, such as the remaking of the literary canon and the recovery of "lost" women writers; or, still more damagingly, at the cost of seeming to deny the distorting effects on feminist criticism and theory of ignoring the writing and criticism of black, Afro-American, or third world women. Like literary study in general, feminist criticism can be called to account for neglecting these different strands in the feminist enterprise. With the inscription of women's cultural, historical, and social oppression, the recognition of ethnic and racial as well as sexual difference—whether in literature, in culture, or in society generally—remains a major task for feminist criticism to undertake.

But for better or worse, my own feminist writing occupies the position I've tried to outline. In admitting to this position, with its limitations as well as its polemicizing tendency, I should say that for me there is a role for a feminist criticism which attempts to read literary and psychoanalytic texts with particular theoretical ends in view—that the pursuit, practice, and investigation of "theory" by way of "reading" (my practice in this book) is a worthwhile and defensible contribution to feminist literary criticism; and that the hostility to both theory and psychoanalysis, whether on the part of traditional literary scholars or from within a divided and multi-faceted feminist movement itself, seems to me misplaced. Feminist literary criticism must speak to, and with, other modes of feminist and literary study, other feminist and critical aims and perspectives, without seeking to elide, deny, or universalize differences which make the contemporary feminist enterprise so necessary, so challenging, and so difficult. This book engages some of the issues confronting feminist critics, whether like or unlike myself, from a particular, declared perspective, that of a psychoanalytically and theoretically informed feminism. Its limitations, as they will surely seem to some, may be the limitations of that perspective; but they are also my own. Its possibilities, I would argue, are those of a feminist literary criticism

committed to the view that issues of theory—theories of reading, textuality, and language; theories of the (gendered) subject—have implications beyond their immediate context; that although the dialogues between sexual and racial difference, or between feminism and Marxism, are not specifically engaged here, the dialogue of theoretical differences necessarily abuts on and provokes them.