GENDERING THE WRITING SUBJECT

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Nobody writes nor reads in a vacuum, away from the economic, social and ideological structures in which she/he lives; and gender as "the social, cultural, and psychological meaning imposed upon biological sexual identity"[1] is one of the important determinants of these structures. Gender as such also implies that concepts of "femininity" or "masculinity" vary widely within various societies and historical periods, and that sexuality is a complex phenomenon shaped by social and personal experience. In this sense, gender informs and complicates both the writing and the reading of texts.

Virginia Woolf, in **A Room of One's Own** wrote that women's writing could not be considered in isolation from the social, economic and political facts that dictate much of women's condition[2]. And that condition is highly marked by subordination. The fact that women have written books only during the eras of their social subordination is reflected in their books "in ways hardly possible for a man to duplicate."[3]. The product cannot be separated from the conditions of its production, as Tillie Olsen argues in **Silences**[4]. That is to say, we do not leave ourselves out of the picture when we start writing and what we produce reflects the constraints under which we live. In the case of women (one should note here that talking about gender means not only talking about women but men as well), this means

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(1) Elaine Showalter, "Introduction: The Rise of Gender", **Speaking of Gender,** ed. E. Showalter, New York and London: Routledge, 1989, p. 2.

(2) Virginia Woolf, **A Room of One's Own,** New York, 1928, reprint ed., Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972, **passim.**

(3) Patricia Meyer Spacks, **The Female Imagination**, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975, p. 5.

(4) Tillie Olsen, **Silences,** London: Virago, 1980, **passim.**

constraints of illeteracy, domestic responsibility, censorship and poverty, as well as lack of professional recognition. Constraints that all of which have distinctive effects on how women perceive and express themselves. Women have been obliged to share a specific political, social and economic experience and their identity shaped through this experience is inextricable in their writings. It is in this sense that Christiane Rochefort says "I consider women's literature as a specific category, not because of biology, but because it is, in a sense, the literature of the colonized."[5]. Then, it is no wonder that we encounter "anger" in many women writing about their own condition. Although Virginia Woolf considers anger a defect in feminine writing, it is there and quite well accounted for.

Gender makes a difference

Again, Virginia Woolf maintains that it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex, but nevertheless it seems writers are not free to renounce or transcend their gender entirely (and of course the same goes with ideology as a whole): "Writers necessarily articulate gendered experience, just as they necessarily articulate the spirit of a nationality, an age, a language."[6]. One could also add class, and race. "There is no outstripping of sexuality any more than there is any sexuality enclosed within itself" philosopher Merleau-Ponty points out,[7] and if a writer is a woman who has been raised as woman her sexual identity can not be split off from her literary energy. The woman writer can imitate men in her writing, or strive for an impersonality beyond sex, but finally she must write as a woman, because there is no other way[8]. Just as Denise Riley points out, "while it is impossible to thoroughly be a woman, it is also impossible never to be one."[9].

Feminist critics agree that a denial by the woman writer of her femininity is also significant for an understanding of the dynamics of her aesthetic creativity. Patricia Meyer Spacks argues that even if a woman wishes to demonstrate her essential identity with male interests and ideas, the necessity of making the demonstration, contradicting the stereotype,

(5) Cited in E. Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", **Writing and Sexual Difference**, ed. E. Abel, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 27.
(6) Alicia Ostriker, cited in E. Showalter, "Introduction: The Rise of Gender", p. 4.
(7) Cited in, Denise Riley, **'Am I Ithat Name'**, Mac Millan Press, 1988, p. 114.
(8) P.M. Spacks, **op. cit.**, p. 35.
(9) Denise Riley, **op. cit.**, p. 114.

allies her initially with her sisters[10]. According to Spacks, although changing social conditions increase or diminish the opportunities for women's action and expression, a special self-awareness emerges through literature in every period[11]. "Because of historical reasons women have concerned themselves with matters more or less peripheral to male concerns, or at least slightly skewed from them. The differences between traditional female preoccupations and roles and male ones make a difference in female writing."[12]

And as Rachel Blau DuPlessis points out with eloquence, it is always the meaning, "the reading of difference" that matters, and meaning is culturally engendered and sustained: "Not body but the 'body' of psychosocial fabrications of difference. Or again, of sameness. Or again, of their relation. The contexts in which are formed and reinforced gendered human beings, produced in the family, in institutions of gender development, in the forms of sexual preference, in the division of labor by gender, especially the structure of infant care, in the class and conditions of families in which we are psychologically born, and in the social maintenance of the sexes through life's stages and in any historical era. And as such, these differing experiences do surely produce (some) different consciousnesses, different cultural expressions, different relations to realms of symbols and symbol users"[13].

The theory of cultural criticism

The theory of cultural criticism put forward by Elaine Showalter maintains that "the female psyche can be studied as the product or construction of cultural forces" and that the ways in which women concep tualize their bodies and their sexual and reproductive functions are closely linked to their cultural environments. Showalter argues that a cultural theory identifies women's collective experience within the cultural whole, while also acknowledging that there are important differences between women as writers: class, race, nationality and history are literary determinants as significant as gender[14]. Thus the feminist study of women's writing -

(10) P.M. Spacks, **op. cit.**, p. 7.
(11) P.M. Spacks, **op. cit.**, p. 1.
(12) P.M. Spack, **op. cit.**, p. 7.
(13) Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "For the Etruscans", **The New Feminist Criticism**, ed. E. Showalter, New York: Pantheon Books, 1985, p. 273.
(14) E. Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", **Writing and Sexual Difference**, p. 27.

gynocriticism- assumes that all writing by women is marked by gender but also recognizes that the meaning of gender needs to be interpreted within a variety of historical, national, racial and sexual contexts. Women writers draw on a common experience but they re-create female experience in different forms. This may be seen to be a direct result of their different developmental experience. Showalter, therefore, warns that "gynocritics must also take into account the different velocities and curves of political, social and personal histories in determining women's literary choices and careers."[15].

Judith K. Gardiner, on the other hand, maintains that "the argument from experience is plausible but limited in its applications; the argument from a separate consciousness is subject to mystification and circular evidence." What she offers as an instrument to help through this "impasse" is "feminist psychology". She argues that the concept of female identity provides a key to understanding the special qualities of contemporary writing by women. According to Gardiner the female identity is a process and this processual nature illuminates diverse traits of writing by women, particularly "its defiance of conventional generic boundaries and of conventional characterization."[16]. Autobiographies by women tend to be less linear, unified and chronological than man's autobiographies. Because of the continual crossing of self and other, women's autobiographies. Because of the continual crossing of self and other, women's writing may blur the public and private and defy completion. Thus, we have writers like Dorothy Richardson and Anais Nin "whose lives, journals, letters, and fiction become nearly coterminus."[17].

This is closely related to what Stephen Yeo has to say on women's autobiographies: "It starts with the personal, with life stories. At best it mixes interviews, prose poems, family and public happenings, memory and fantasy, straight historical narrative and analytically-informed interpretation, in tightly-cut modernist collage. Its rythms are close to how most people think and feel, unlike the items which have for long been learned by rote in history classes. The genre is grounded in experience, but may yet develop the capacity to transform what it finds there in novel ways."[18]

(15) E. Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics", **The New Feminist Criticism,** p. 132.
(16) Judith K. Gardiner, "On Female Identity", **Writing and Sexual Difference,** p. 178, and **passim.**
(17) Judith K. Gardiner, **ibid.,** p. 185.
(18) Stephen Yeo, "Difference, Autobiography and History", **Literature and History,** p. 38.

One reason why, women writers "give some distinctive turns to old verities about appearance and reality" is that a woman's sense of her gender, her sexuality and her body may assume a different, perhaps more prominent shape in her conception of her self than these factors would for a man. Women experience an alienation between outer and inner selves because they are encouraged to judge their inner selves through their external physical appearance and to equate the two. Woman writers interpret this alienation in various ways which mays which may be traced in their writing[19].

Woman: both an insider and outsider

Another factor which accounts for the difference in women's writing is what Rachel Blau DuPlessis identifies as "women's insider and outsider social status." For the woman is an outsider by her gender position, by her relation to power, but may be an insider by her social position, her class. Therefore for women, "existing in the dominant system of meanings and values that structure culture and society may be a painful, or amusing, double dance, clicking in, clicking out- the divided consciousness."[20].

Virginia Woolf, talking about this same "sudden split off of consciousness" observes that while it is "unpleasant to be locked out... it is worse perhaps, to be locked in."[21] Being locked out, being an outsider to the existing dominant culture may indeed contribute to the acquisition of a critical attitude towards it, and for that matter to its transformation.

The divided consciousness of women is reflected in yet another trait of women's writing: its "bitextuality". Women's writing necessarily takes place within, rather than outside, a dominant male discourse. In this sense it is "always bitextual, in dialogue with both masculine and feminine literary traditions... Women's literary and critical texts are both double voiced discourses, inevitably and continually engaged with patrilineal and matrilineal sources."[22].

According to Showalter, in some women's literature, feminine values penetrate and undermine the masculine systems that contain them as reflected in women's having imaginatively engaged the myths of the

(19) Judith K. Gardiner, **op. cit.,** p. 190.
(20) Virginia Woolf, **A Room of One's Own,** p. 101.
(21) Virginia Woolf, **A Room of One's Own,** p. 101.
(22) E. Showalter, "Introduction: The Rise of Gender", **Speaking of Gender,** pp. 4-5.

amazons and the fantasies of a separate female society[23]. But this is an arduous task, for culture is so saturated with male bias that women can hardly see themselves culturally through their own eyes. Then if they manage to do this, they still must express it through the dominant ideology and language. Women constitute a "muted group" in the sense that the dominant structure is articulated in terms of a male world-position and that women are rendered "inarticulate" by the male structure[24].

Writing is a possibility for freedom

There is a long tradition of identifying the author as a male who is primary and the female as his passive creation, a secondary object lacking autonomy, endowed with often contradictory meaning but denied intentionality. This tradition obviously draws on the nature/culture dichotomy and the notion that women are close to nature, only reproducing mortal human beings while men produce immortal signs!

Freud talking to an audience once said: "Throughout the ages the problem of woman has puzzled people of every kind... You too will have pondered this question insofar as you are men. From the women among you that is not to be expected, for you yourselves are the riddle."[25]. Then it was only natural that women should be excluded from the creation of culture; how could the "riddle itself" be expected to create a riddle?

Because women writing is a challenge to the dominant ideological structure, a claim to power, it is "particularly problematic for those who want to appropriate the pen by becoming writers".[26] Indeed, the women writers of the nineteenth century had to deal with their anxiety about authorship because they feared their attempts at the pen were "presumptuous, castrating, or even monstrous." Although the women's movement and the women's literature of the twentieth century have contributed a lot to the overcoming of this, it still seems to be in the air, but perhaps taking on new forms: "I can only write as I am -a woman of this

(23) E. Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics", **The New Feminist Criticism,** p. 131.

(24) Edwin Ardener, "The 'Problem' Revisited", **Perceiving Women,** ed. Shirley Ardener, New York, 1977, p. 22.

(25) S. Freud, **New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis,** New York, W.W. Norton, 1933, pp. 154-55, cited in R.B. DuPlessis, "For the Etruscans", **The New Feminist Criticism,** p. 295, and **passim.**

(26) Susan Gubar, "The Black Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity", **The New Feminist Criticism,** p. 295, and **passim.**

time and culture- and **I have made apologies for poetry for years, calling it self-indulgence.** But my biggest block has been fear... I fear speaking my words to another, risking both their criticism and rejection and their acceptance and expectation."[27] (The emphasis is mine.)

But for those who have been daring enough to take the challenge and engage in the creative writing process, writing may represent a viable possibility for freedom, "For a poem to coalesce, for a character or an action to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive, and a certain freedom of the mind is needed" writes Adrienne Rich[28]. And perhaps it is the letting free of the "subversive function of the imagination"[29] that gives the sense of freedom. But it is also the defiance of an age-old tradition that objectifies women and expressing oneself as an autonomous and intentional being, a subject, and the pleasure of finding new forms of expression, a new language that goes along with it:

"I want to write poetry with muscle
– words that can't be pummelled into submission
but swagger seeking across a page.
I want a new vocabulary for living,
a grammar with contradictions
where mind and body rhyme
and my heart's beat
sound in the sea."

(Chris Cherry, extract from "Iceberg").

(27) Chris Cherry, "Poetry-Who Cares", **In Other Words,** .... p. 28.
(28) Adrienne Rich, **On ties, Secrets, and Silence,** New York: W.W. Norton, 1979, p. 43.
(29) A. Rich, **ibid.**

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