

THE NEW FEMINIST CRITICISM: ESSAYS ON WOMEN, LITERATURE AND THEORY. Edited by Elaine Showalter. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985, 403pp.

This book is a collection of eighteen major essays on feminist criticism, which is basically concerned with the literary representations of sexual difference and establishes gender as a fundamental category of literary analysis. According to Showalter, the assumptions of literary study have been totally modified in the last decade due to the impact of the feminist critical revolution. This important approach to literature has "opened a space for the authority of the woman critic that extends beyond the study of women's writing to the reappraisal of the whole body of texts" (p.3).

The essays represent a variety of positions, since feminist criticism has evolved from many sources: history, psychology, anthropology, women's literature and from the reconsideration of literary theory itself. Linguistics, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, structuralism and marxism have been used as analytical tools, but revised and reinterpreted from the perspective of gender. One of the major concerns of women critics is how to combine the theoretical and the personal. Male-oriented theoreticians tend to exclude the personal, claiming that 'objectivity' and 'rigour' are the bases of a sound theoretical methodology. For feminist critics, however, the relationship of literature to personal experience is crucial, since work and life are inseparable. The exposition of misogyny in literary practice, the connections between sexuality and textuality, genre and gender, women's culture and language are issues that should question any criteria of aesthetic value. Feminist criticism of the 80's, therefore, not only recognizes women's writings of all times, but also rethinks the conceptual grounds of literary study that have been previously based on male literary experience.

The essays of the book are divided into three parts. In the first one, "What Do Feminist Critics Want? The Academy and the Canon," major feminist authors like Carolyn Heilbrun, Sandra Gilbert and Annette Kolodny among others discuss how traditional concepts of literary history and meaning have excluded women's

work and how this is reflected on the academic world. Part II, "Feminist Criticism and Women's Culture," deals with political and theoretical issues related to the goals of the women's movement. Elaine Showalter's seminal article "Towards a Feminist Poetics" explores the possibility of a feminist theory, which she calls 'gynocritics' - the independent (from male models) study of women's writings and female creativity. In Part III, "Woman's Writing and Feminist Critical Theories," authors like Rachel DuPlessis and Susan Gubar analyse different approaches to the literature of women based on social contexts, themes, structures and styles.

Feminist criticism, already incorporated into other schools of modern criticism, will without any doubt influence literary studies in general. This book is therefore an important document for any serious consideration of gender in theoretical practices.

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