

Can Women Have, and Do They Need a Literature of Their Own?

Do women write and do they read differently from men? And do women writers, due to their peculiar history and writing conditions, their often unfulfilled desire for what Virginia Woolf labeled as ‘a room of one’s own’, thus need a separate literary niche? A niche, where the ‘otherness’ of their works could be protected against the male standards of mainstream literary criticism, and where their works could be (re-)evaluated by the potentially more sympathetic, ‘skilled’ view of feminist critics? Is there, in the year of 1999, which is often said to be marked of an ‘anything goes’ - mentality, still the need for such a shelter? The thesis postulated by the critic Elaine Showalter clearly approves of this consideration. Yes, women have, and they do need a literature of their own, as well as they do need a criticism of their own. Yes, there is a distinct literary female tradition in whose impact current women writers, partly consciously, partly unconsciously produce their works, and to which they should be proud to add their verses. Yes, in a ‘man’s world’, the necessity of a feminist criticism is still alive and vivid. As I will try to argue in the following, Showalter’s proposal moves on the thin red line between celebrating her pride of a female tradition, and the polemical cherishment of prejudices against the misogynist-assumed male literary world, and unfortunately often tends to topple to the latter side.

Although Showalter’s book is worth reading because it excellently exemplifies the often neglected continuity of women’s writing, the fact, “that women have had a literature of their own all along“ (Showalter, p.10), I disagree with her in most of her concerns. But in order to treat her approach justly: What makes Showalter’s analysis so important is its attempt to rescue minor female writers from an oblivion they in fact do not deserve. Her diachronic categorization of the history of women’s literature helps to emphasise significant similarities within their works. Nevertheless, I would hesitate to label these affinities as a “collective character” (Showalter, p.4), or even as a “covert solidarity“ (p.15). The cruxus here is, that Showalter’s accentuation of the hidden *continuity* of women’ writing seem to neglect the specific *discontinuity* of the category ‘woman’. Due to the intersecting axes of nationality, race, class, education and sexuality, women have never formed a homogenic group - a fact which has been shaping women’s entire history persistently. But what definitely lends weight to Showalter’s approach is its realization of the very *existence* of an literary maternal ancestorship, even though the latter must be seen as an ambivalent heritage. Showalters’ stress

on women's peculiar writing conditions still proves to be extremely necessary, because among current literary critics misogynist attitudes against female writers are still - often unconsciously - cherished. Her analysis urgently allows the insight, that the non-existence of a 'Shakespeare's sister' and the distinct 'oddities' in their works, cannot be simply drawn back to lack of women's creative energy, but rather to A certain socio-cultural background. Due to economic and social plight, women writers were never really free to write as they wished. Apart from economic dependence on their husbands, they additionally were bound to adopt the standards of the then male literary canon, and often failed to meet them - due to a phenomenon Showalter labels as "the double standard of literary criticism" (Showalter, p.20). Viewed through this more psychological lense, women often suffered from what has been labeled as 'the anxiety of authorship'. What Showalter urgently demonstrates, is that patriarchal ideology treated artistic creativity as a fundamentally male quality, which women were supposed never to achieve anyway. What we can learn from this feminist approach, is that intellectual freedom - no matter if for men or women - always corresponds with economic prerequisites and social freedom.

Like Virginia Woolf, Showalter explains the increasing amount of women writers in the 19th and especially 20th century with the raise of the novel - a genre that was "soft enough" (Woolf, p.80) to be altered by a female style of writing, and which fitted women's restricted living conditions perfectly well. By depicting the writing of women as a kind of undercurrent running below or alongside the mainstream of male literary tradition, Showalter distinguishes three major phases within this historical development (see Showalter, p.13):

1. Feminine phase (imitation and internalization of the male literary tradition)
2. Feminist phase (protest against this tradition and advocacy of their own rights)
3. Female phase (self-discovery and search for identity)

Surely, it is inevitable, to become aware of this unique background in order to evaluate both women's past and contemporary writing in an adequate way. But as I will try to exemplify in the following, the definition of a 'female' identity, as far as the French feminism, most of all Luce Irigaray, tends to define it, is clearly opposed to what Showalter depicts as a 'literature of their own'.

I

A Literature of their Own?

Imagining the practical consequences of a 'literature of their own', I see three crucial obstacles, all closely corresponding with the definition of the problematic term 'woman's literature'.

Firstly, would its realization mean to set up a separate syllabus, exclusively containing works by women which would be taught by women to women? The danger, which this approach holds in my eyes, is to end up in exactly that dilemma, feminists desperately had tried to flee from: once again the alienation and marginalization from a broader, 'general' audience, once again the attempt to practice a sexual separatism that is to force women writers into the constrain of creating an. "original, primary, and independent art" (Showalter, p.3) - an attempt they definitely will never be able to fulfill.

Referring to this point of criticism, I additionally feel inclined to reproach Showalter with what nowadays is often labeled as 'inverted sexism'. Believing in the thesis first put forward by Julia Kristeva, saying, that the nature of all human beings is inherently bisexual, I regard it as a too simplistic and one-sided enterprise, just to cut women's works off from the general literary tradition. For such a position would implicitly claim, that literature written by men is not at all, or at least less interesting to me only because I am a woman. And is it really the case, that I cannot be affected by those inner, fundamental human conflicts Shakespeare depicts in his tragedies? Feminists believing in Julia Kristeva's adaptation of Lacanian psychoanalysis would surely argue that the only reason why I am able to identify with a tragic hero like Hamlet is that I have been raised in a 'man's world', where my access to a maternal ideal is barred by the male laws of the symbolic order. Due to such an early determination, I unconsciously and inevitably cherish the male perception of the world, which patriarchal society makes me internalize. Arguments like this often end up in saying, that women have to keep on searching for an 'authentic' female perspective and an 'authentic' female language. In my eyes, this is a too strict, and not at least fatal position to be assumed honestly.

Even in 1929, Woolf exposed such an approach as following into the footsteps into patriarchal ideal of human essentialism. Only because I am a woman, I am not simply barred from what we appreciate as 'reality'. Quite the contrary, I even got hold of two perspectives on the world as well as on literary texts: firstly, the identification with the masculine subject, secondly with the female object. As a woman, I can experience the paradox feeling of admiring a poet like Shakespeare for his great depiction of a tragic hero like Hamlet, but at the same time harshly disliking him for the creation of passive, puppet-like female characters such

as Ophelia in the said play - a feeling which Virginia Woolf once labeled as the phenomenon of the 'divided self'. When I imagine a separate feminist canon restricting my access to literature written by members of the 'other sex', I imagine it as the exclusion from an important part of the world.

Apart from once again marginalising female artists, it would counterwork the very aims of current feminist struggle, namely the 'androgynisation' of great art. The crucial point is, that only because I am a woman, this does not automatically mean, that I despise literature written by men as *per se* sexist. When Virginia Woolf in her famous essay 'amateurishly sketches a plan of the artist's soul, she depicts it as being what she calls 'androgynous': "The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two [souls] live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating" (Woolf, p.102). This circumscribes the ideal of an outbalanced integration of both female and male characteristics - a consideration I would definitely prefer to an idea like a 'literature of her own'. For if literature written by women is simply withheld from the male reader's eyes, the latter cannot be confronted with the female perception of the world, and thus cannot alter their own views.

What I see as second stumbling stone of a separate syllabus is which criteria would one, or would 'she' choose to decide whether or not a woman writer follows the said common heritage. Or do all works written by women automatically count among 'woman's literature'? Is it, when I am a woman, I simply cannot help writing 'woman's literature'? And if woman's literature was defined as works necessarily dealing with women's issues, does it mean, that female writers are not allowed to explore genres like that of the adventure- or detective novel? In an age, where our conventional notions of ominous inherently masculine or feminine aspects are so fundamentally challenged due to deconstructive theories, it appears to be a rather old-fashioned enterprise to plead for a strict demarcation line between 'woman's literature' versus 'man's literature'. It proves to be almost impossible to find an exact definition of what hides behind the expression of 'woman's literature'. For the category of 'woman' in its very nature must be seen as a heterogenic, rather than a homogenic entity. If you take contemporary female writers like Toni Morrison, Jeanette Winterson and Margaret Atwood, they surely write within something like a female tradition, or as Virginia Woolf had put it, they consciously write by "think[ing] back through [their] mothers" (Woolf, p.101). But fortunately, due to their different racial, cultural, social and sexual backgrounds, they demonstrate more differences, than similarities. In addition, one must not confuse literature

written by women as synonym for feminist literature. For not any female writer can be claimed for feminist causes. There are even some who consciously assume an anti-feminist position. Quite the contrary of the ideal of a 'collective sisterhood', women writers are often harshly attacked for their feminist concerns by members of their own sex. Furthermore, I am sure that an aesthetically ambitious female writer like Jeanette Winterson would experience it as a highly reductive evaluation to be recognized due to her feminist concerns *only*, or by an exclusive female audience.

The third stumbling stone I see with regard to Showalter's enterprise is the question, who would set up decisive criteria for a separate syllabus, and upon which theoretical basis? Her emphasis on the importance of an "extensive knowledge" of women's life and the emphasis on the need "to think intelligently" (Showalter, p.8) about women's works, which implicitly runs like a red line throughout her book, undoubtedly suggests and parallels exactly such an arbitrary literary canon, whose demand for 'proper reading' the New Criticism movement so revolutionarily and vehemently neglected.

Finally, I firmly disagree with the setting up of a separate syllabus. For such an enterprise means to follow in the footsteps of exactly that patriarchal binary thinking, which feminist criticism is actually concerned with attacking. To create a fixed and firm 'feminist' canon must inevitably be recognized as an attempt to banish contradiction, and hence acts as a complice of patriarchal ideology, whose central concept still is the unitary self.

II

A Literary Criticism of Their Own?

Meanwhile, feminist literary criticism fortunately has overcome its polemical and simple infancy. Nowadays, there are sophisticated theories, which must be seen as inevitable and integral figures within the literary arena. As a rough, general division, one might split up feminist literary into its scrutiny of female authors' works - what Showalter calls 'gynocritics' - on the one hand, and the re-reading of male authors' works on the other hand.

Regarding the treatment of women's literature in the sphere of feminist literary criticism, I observe the following tendency, which only few women writers manage to circumnavigate: if a work is not 'feminist' enough, its value sinks in the eye of feminist literary critics. If it is 'too' feminist due to its integration of provoking and didactic elements, it is blamed by non-feminist critics for its minor aesthetic quality.

With regard to the problematic definition of an ‘authentic’ female style, I firmly agree with Cixous’ emphasis on the superiority of the sex of the text to the sex of the author. For can one really definitely say, if a text is written by a male or a female author? At least in my eyes, Virginia Woolf’s claim, that you can say it from the very first sentence, is an exaggerated statement. But surely she is right when she observes the tendency for both past and contemporary women’s writing that “a man’s sentence [is] unsuited to a woman’s use” (Woolf, p.95), and that therefore their writing often proved to be more diffuse and fragmented. In order to find a kind of ‘language of their own’, which was suitable to express their own subjectivity, women writers almost automatically experimented with texts, and hence altered traditional narratives. Woolf is right when she observes in the fictional book by the fictional author she calls Mary Carmichael, that there is something very specific about her writing. Distinctively, “she had gone further and broke an the sequence - the expected order” (Woolf, p.95). But like nowadays’ critics, Woolf severely struggles to define the ‘otherness’ of the female style in more definite terms. She *senses* that there *is* something different, something new about it, but she proves to be vague about the nature of its specificity. With regard to the crucial question of what it means to write ‘like a woman’, Woolf turns out to be rather ambivalent. At one hand she claims that it is “fatal for any one who writes to think of their sex” (Woolf, p.108) and therefore pleads for an androgynous writing. On the other hand, she is convinced that one cannot help being influenced by one’s own sex, and argues for the maintenance of this specificity. Anyway, with regard to modern literature, Luce Irigaray’s crude former distinction between men writing linearly, versus women writing fragmentedly, has turned out to be obsolete. For was it not at least Woolf’s acknowledged ideal James Joyce, who was responsible for the pioneering integration of the highly associative, non-chronological stream-of-consciousness technique? Additionally, I would refrain from assuming a strong feminist position based on Lacanian psychoanalysis, arguing, that women’s acquisition of language is ultimately barred by the determining entrance into the male ‘Oedipal phase’, and that conclusively they do not have any ‘authentic’ language at all, or should be engaged with the struggle to gain one.

But nevertheless, Virginia Woolf is certainly right when she stresses the enormous obstacles with regard to style, which especially early women writers faced by the lack of an appropriate female tradition. For since there were no categories after which critics could judge their works, they were often reproached with either imitating men’s writing, or with being ‘not

as good' as their male fellow writers. And in fact, there were times, when there was something true about these statements. For male critics harsh rejection of their work often lead female writers to "alter[...] [their] values in deference to the opinion of others" (Woolf, p.77). Women's "I" (Woolf, p.104) was far away from being as self-assured and self-confident as men's. Nowadays, female writers are deeply aware of the existence of a female literary tradition. But seemingly, they are not satisfied with merely participating within this tradition, modes of writing, but feel the need of altering, or even transcending what have been labeled as a 'female style'.

With regard to subject matters, the definition of women's writing even proves to be more embarrassing than with regard to style. Due to the extreme narrowness of female life up to the beginning of the 20th century, the topics of their novels were most often automatically restricted to home, children and family life. Nowadays, fortunately, this proves to be different, and I consider it to be rather dangerous than productive attempt, to press women's writing once again into specific categories. Trying to crystallise out the favorite subjects around which women writers center their works, one often loses oneself in superficial, generalising statements saying that women tend to focus on aspects as human relationships, love, mother-daughter conflicts, pacifistic politics - and often ends up in the sad old clichés highlighting women's sensibility, meekness and faculty of observation. It definitely is a much too simplistic approach. And there are hundreds of counter-examples springing to mind. So does Patricia Duncker's first novel *Hallucinating Foucault* in its main story line deal with the homosexual relationship between two men, and - quite contrary to the *kinder, kueche, kirche* topics - discusses sophisticated poststructuralist controversies. And while no one would seriously categorise the subject matters in the writing of Harriet Beecher Stowe as peculiarly feminine ones, Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady* proves that being male and being concerned with women's issues is not mutually exclusive - although this does not mean that the latter treats these issues in a 'feminist' way.

As well as women have always written about men have always written about women. Something like a 'female style' can be found in both male and female writers' works. But due to the unconscious idiosyncrasies of the male writer, the portrayal of members of the other sex often turned out to put them in crude black and white terms - a phenomenon pointed out and attacked by the 70s critic Millett, who exposed the literary representation of women in the Western literary canon as mostly misogynist. Early feminists hence emphasised the necessity

of a literature, that mirrors 'authentic' female experiences rather than idiosyncratically spoiled misconceptions. This 'images of women' - criticism meanwhile has turned out to be not only an exhaustive, but furthermore a questionable enterprise. Its demand for three dimensional, 'authentic', 'realistic' depiction seems to hold certain dangers: literary texts do not simply represent reality and they cannot, as the approach of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar tried to make us believe, simply be dismissed as somehow palimpsestic works, the - of course - *female* critic has to decipher in search for a 'real' message hiding behind the metaphorical costume. Furthermore, it is a highly reductionist position completely neglecting the aspect of artistic quality to read literary works such as, e.g., by Emily Dickinson simply as cryptic documents reflecting her social misery.

Like any other competitive theory, feminist literary criticism adds its verse to what Roland Barthes once called the "multi-dimensional space" of literary works. It should not aim for 'true', 'final', 'definite' modes of reading. As its most important contribution I regard its acceptance of the provisional nature of reading, as well as its rejection of fixed and ultimate interpretations. This again goes back to a certain historical circumstances, since for a very long time, not unlike other marginalised groups of society, women have been excluded from the center of the culture they shared, and therefore had been inside and outside of it at the same time. Since women's views on both life and literature still up to now tend to include the experience of this kind of 'squinting glance', their views almost automatically put 'reality' into question. According to Woolf, this experience is exclusively reserved to women. But what it offers to open-minded male readers is to challenge their alleged 'monolithic' truths on life. What Woolf regarded as the great potential of an dialectical interplay of both female and male perspectives is a new apprehension of the *status quo*, and thus an openness for social change. Such an aim, in my eyes could hardly be achieved by the creation of a separate syllabus.

Nevertheless, despite all its fruitful achievements, I think it worthwhile to expose three essential dangers, which especially the Anglo-American school of criticism tends to hold due to often unconsciously cherished prejudices. Like any other literary criticism, feminist criticism always privileges certain aspects of a text by obliterating others, and sometimes ignores the complexity of literary works.

Firstly, there is the assumption that all male writers are *per se* sexist. The re-reading of the once fixed, 'male', and often misogynist literary canon, though it unmasks yet undiscovered

facades, unfortunately often corresponds with ideologically spoiled mis-reading. Instead of desperately searching for the often cited ‘silences’, the ‘not-said’, they so often discover in literature written by men, feminist critics would sometimes do better to rely upon what these texts actually *do* say. In my eyes, they often seem to neglect the socio-cultural background, against which a male writer as, e.g. Goethe produced his works. It is easy to judge him by the exhausting argument of misogyny. What is much more interesting is to admit the subtle alternations that set him positively apart from most of his fellow writers, as e.g. Schiller.

Analogous to the assumption that all male writers are *per se sexist*, there secondly is the fatal conclusion, that women’s works, as long as they are concerned with feminist issues, are automatically to be treated sympathetically. In contrast to feminist’s critique of the dominion of the author, they themselves paradoxically fail to read texts written by women in a similar anti-authorial fashion, and even sometimes tend to confuse the author with the character the female writer depicts. Feminist critics often seem to feel restrains in front of attacking, or merely criticising their female fellow writers. Due to this dilemma, the praise of sophisticated women writers always seems to be relativated. What I consider to hold the greatest danger of feminist literary criticism is the imposed credo that all works by women have to reflect their ‘authentic’ experiences as women. Otherwise, these works are, as Showalter unfairly does with regard to Virginia Woolf, dismissed as being ‘merely aesthetically’ valuable. From my point of view, Showalter simply misunderstands both Woolf’s essayistic and fictional works. To claim her approach as being ‘inauthentic’, offends the very nature of literature. For literature is by no way just the neutral registration and depiction of ‘reality’. Only because Virginia Woolf discusses women’s economic and social plight upon a very sophisticated, rather abstract level, it is outrageous to degrade her feminist impetus to a ‘secondary’ feature. The dilemma, which encourages writers like Joyce Carol Oates to plead for individual style and genderless writing, is that ‘woman’s literature’ often runs risk of degenerating to mere propaganda on women’s issues.

Thirdly, there is the feminist preoccupation with the quest for ‘authentic’ ‘full femininity’, and an ‘authentic’ female style. Like many critics I regard this quest not only to be an insoluble problem, but to follow in the patriarchal tradition of essentialism, which feminism in its very nature should be concerned with attacking. As Woolf pointed out even 70 years ago, there is no such thing as the “‘unity of the mind’” (Woolf, p.101). Since I firmly agree with Judith Butler’s theory of the inherent androgyny of the human mind as well as her

deconstructive position, which abolishes the polarisation of male versus female innate characteristics, I think that feminist writers should refrain from offering idealized, totalised visions of what a female future self should be. Utopian visions of an all-female country like that of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* urgently demonstrates the limitations of a society, that is based on sexual separatism. What current writers like Jeanette Winterson offer instead, are possible glimpses into female future personalities. But they never leave a doubt upon the fact, that their own views are only one possibility among others.

Virginia Woolf, although she argued that there is something distinct about a female voice, and although her famous recapitulation of Shakespeare's gifted sister Judith puts emphasis on the odds of the female literary tradition, nevertheless shared the assumption, that all great art must indeed be genderless. According to Woolf's conception of androgyny, an androgynous mind is more porous, more open-minded with regard to the perception of the world. Viewed through the lense of androgyny, the psychologically fascinating subject of the other sex is treated in a rather tolerant, pacifist manner. What in my eyes still nowadays disrupts women's writing is their dive in anger. Since the woman writer is permanently concerned with defending her own and attacking the other sex, she sometimes continues binary thinking, instead of abolishing it for her own purpose. According to Cixous' theory, women should use their writing rather as a means of escaping from binary categories of gender, than as a means of enhancing them. Even in 1929, Virginia Woolf uttered the necessity that women should begin "to use writing as an art, not [only] as a method of self-expression" (Woolf, p.83). Hence, taking her as their role-model, many recent female writers like A.S. Byatt or Angela Carter try to bridge the gap between a genderless art and mere propagandizing towards what has been labeled as a feminist aesthetics. The harmonious combination of both literary challenging and feministically engaged texts, still up to now seems to constitute a tremendous problem. A writer like Jeanette Winterson in my eyes seem to meet both criteria perfectly well. For her novels shed loveably ironic light upon the often lamented 'insolubility' of femininity, as well as they clearly move apart from a didactic impetus, which is so often associated with 'feminist literature'.

Finally, despite all the critique of Showalter's approach, in my view, there definitely is something distinctive about literature written by women. Since they have experienced a different treatment in history, have a different biology, experience different physical

peculiarities, women almost automatically write ‘differently’. Surely, they form a separate group. And surely does it prove to be interesting to look upon works by female writers from the feminist angle. The cruxus here is that all these theoretic suggestions often end up with recognizing differences, and with defining female art exclusively in opposition to the male triton, and thus as that ‘otherness’ Simone de Beauvoir had reflected on even 50 years ago.

Like the question of femininity being an insoluble problem, the definition of women’s literature seems to be somehow ‘insoluble’ as well. From my personal point of view, an absolute answer need not and cannot necessarily be given. To merge the variety of books, which nowadays seem to count among this category into the ‘superego’ of an one and only definition, does not appear to be very fruitful. So we got: books written by women, books written by women about women’s issues, books written by women not only about women’s issues, and, hardly astonishingly, also books written by men about women’s issues.

Nowadays, women are supposed to be free to write about everything in whatever way and style they prefer. Both the Anglo-American as well as the French school seemingly have come to terms that something like the ‘authentic’ female style does not exist. Gender differences are mostly considered as social constructs rather than innate characteristics. Feminists like Judith Butler and Helene Cixous thus urgently emphasise the impossibility of raising something like a gender determined voice, and strictly deny the possibility of ever being able to define a female practice of writing apart from defining it in opposition to the male literary tradition. For according to Derrida’s theory of *differance*, meaning of words arises from difference only. Thus, would it ever be possible, or at all reasonable to undertake such an enterprise? And to close my essay with Virginia Woolf’s words: “So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters; and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say” (Woolf, p.110).

Bibliography

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