

Feminist Criticism: The First/Last Twenty Years

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There is scarce a Poet that our English tongue boasts of, who is more he subject of the Ladies' reading [than Shakespeare].

(Lewis Theobald, 1726)¹

Women may read Shakespeare, but men edit him.

(Gary Taylor, 1988)²

In a recent essay called '*Hamlet: A Document in Madness*', Alison Findlay echoes Taylor when she concludes with a reference to the difficulty female scholars have had 'trying to write themselves into the bibliographical history of the play':

Hamlet has never been edited by a woman. The text is notoriously challenging since the contradictions between the 'Good Quarto' [1604/5], the 'Bad Quarto [1603]' and the Folio [1623] make *Hamlet* itself a 'document in madness'. At I.iii.20-21 ['for on his choice depends, / The sanity and health of this whole state'], the creation of 'sanity' has been, to date, the privilege of Theobald and subsequent male editors, from the starting points of 'safty' in the 'Good Quarto', the [1611] third Quarto's 'safety', and the Folio's 'sanctity'. The opportunity to rationalize the different voices of this schizophrenic text has been limited to men, the Hamlets rather than the Ophelias of the academic world, thus reproducing the gender imbalance of the play.³

As Findlay notes, the word 'sanity' does not occur in any of the three early texts of *Hamlet*, but was suggested as an emendation by Lewis Theobald in 1726 (in the text quoted above, *Shakespeare Restored*) and first adopted in print by Thomas Hanmer in his 1744 edition. Amongst modern editors, Harold Jenkins for Arden 2⁴ and G.R. Hibbard for Oxford⁵ print 'sanity', the latter in spite of his professed commitment to the Folio text, as vaunted on the cover of the paperback edition. Philip Edwards for Cambridge⁶ is more consistent to his avowed loyalty to the Folio in printing 'sanctity', a reading he nevertheless feels obliged to justify in a lengthy note, while T.J.B. Spencer for Penguin⁷ has more faith in the second quarto and consequently prints 'safety'.

Findlay is primarily concerned with 'the gender imbalance of the play' in terms of its treatment of sanity's other: madness. As writers such as Elaine Showalter and Juliana Schiesari have shown,⁸ Hamlet and Ophelia are available as useful icons in our culture exemplifying respectively male madness (mental or

spiritual, allied to genius, quite prestigious) and female madness (physiological, allied to sexual inadequacy or frustration, totally lacking in glamour). I shall be more concerned in this paper with the gender imbalance in Shakespeare studies and with the attempts of women to correct this, though I shall return to *Hamlet* later.

First, some pre-history. Women have generally had a hard time trying to write, talk, act or otherwise insinuate themselves into the prestigious and influential cultural industry sometimes known in the U.S.A. today as 'Bardbiz'. Initially excluded from the stage itself, they then had to contend, as actresses, with a theatrical tradition which, as Eliabeth Howe has shown, exploited their bodies and exposed their private lives to slander and satire.⁹ Emerging from the considerable handicap of illiteracy in the early eighteenth century, they were at least admitted as readers, as my epigraph demonstrates; also, as Theobald (who edited Shakespeare in 1733) would have been aware, they could be counted amongst the subscribers to (or direct financial backers of) the numerous eighteenth-century editions of the Complete Works. They participated in what Michael Dobson calls *The Making of the National Poet* during this period: the Shakespeare Ladies Club was influential in the 1730s in supporting the project to erect a monument to Shakespeare in Westminster Abbey (achieved in 1741) and in petitioning theatre managements to revive Shakespeare instead of putting on Restoration comedies and Italian operas. An epilogue of 1738 informed the audience of its debt to the Ladies Club in these terms:

When worse than barbarism had sunk your taste,
 When nothing pleas'd but what laid virtue waste,
 A sacred band, determin'd, wise, and good,
 They jointly rose to stop th'exotick flood,
 And strove to wake, by *Shakespeare's* nervous lays,
 The manly genius of *Eliza's* days.¹⁰

Thus 'Shakespeare' was identified with morality and patriotism, even with English virility as against effeminate foreign imports. This epilogue was written by George Lillo for his *Marina*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Pericles* which (ironically in this context) concentrates the play into a protracted version of its brothel scenes. Meanwhile, writers such as Charlotte Lennox (*Shakespeare Illustrated*, 1753), Elizabeth Montagu (*An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare*, 1769) and Elizabeth Griffith (*The Morality of Shakespeare's Drama Illustrated*, 1775) assisted in the canonization of Shakespeare as national poet and upholder of bourgeois morality.

This effort to refine and domesticate Shakespeare on the part of what one might call the 'Ladies Auxiliary' continued into the early nineteenth century when women such as Henrietta Bowdler, editor of the notorious *Family Shakespeare* (1807) and Mary Lamb, co-author of the *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807) played significant roles in making Shakespeare accessible to (or safe for) other women and children, by expurgation, abridgement and paraphrase, an industry which spawned countless versions of the plays for young people throughout the century. Sadly, the first woman who could be accounted a serious scholar of Shakespeare, Mary Cowden Clarke, who produced an edition of the Complete Works in 1860 and a Concordance (*The Shakespeare-Key*) in 1845, is best remembered (and ignorantly dismissed) today for *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (1850). Her attempt to erect a statue to Shakespeare, funded exclusively by contributions from women, seems to have come to nothing.¹¹

Nevertheless, women in the mid-and late-nineteenth century were making their impact on

Shakespeare studies through their writings as critics, as performers, and as contributors to the numerous Shakespeare Societies: even the Royal Shakespearean Club in Stratford allowed lady visitors from 1894, while the proceedings of the New Shakespeare Society in London record several papers given by women from 1876 onwards. In North America the picture was similar, with particular concentrations of scholarly and publishing activity in Philadelphia and Boston. The tradition that reading and private study alone were a woman's proper sphere was however wonderfully preserved in an essay in the U.S. periodical *Manhattan* in June 1884 called 'Why Women should study Shakespeare'. The author, J. Heard, argued that 'no country has ever been so dependent on its women as our country is today', and that in the context of increasing and inevitable emancipation such study would provide the insights necessary for the moral regeneration of America.¹²

I have devoted some time to the pre-twentieth-century history of women's participation in the Shakespeare industry because most of it, like so many other endeavours by women, is virtually lost to us today. These women are not necessarily feminists, but they often use Shakespeare to articulate women's issues and they hold their own in competition with men, at least in the period of amateur scholarship before 1900. Women's contribution in the first three quarters of the twentieth century is perhaps less interesting as they seem usually to be doing their best to fit into a mould created by the increasingly professionalised men though of course there are many individual exceptions to this sweeping statement.

While some notable precursors can be identified Carolyn Heilbrun for example, who has recently described herself as 'a feminist waiting for a cause to join' when she published her essay on Gertrude in 1957¹³ it is usually acknowledged that feminist criticism as we know it began 'officially' in 1975 with Juliet Dusinberre's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*.¹⁴ This book is taken as the obvious starting-point by Philip C. Kolin in his very useful *Shakespeare and Feminist Criticism: An Annotated Bibliography and Commentary*¹⁵ which lists 439 items from 1975 to the cut-off date in 1988. A glance at any academic publisher's catalogue will reveal that the rate of publication has if anything increased since then. Macmillan are reissuing Dusinberre's book with a new Preface to mark the first twenty years of feminist study of Shakespeare or the last twenty years, meaning the most recent. In the remainder of this paper I want to attempt a necessarily brief sketch of what has been achieved, what is currently at issue, and what might yet be ahead.

Dusinberre gives her 1995 Preface an interrogative title, 'Beyond the Battle?'. The question mark seems appropriate both in relation to the state of feminist scholarship itself: is the battle lost or won? and to the extent to which the whole enterprise has been about asking questions: asking *different* questions about the Shakespearean texts themselves and using those texts to investigate 'women's place in culture, history, religion, society, the family'.¹⁶ It seems to me there is now no doubt that these questions are inescapably on the academic agenda and that they have moved from the margin to the centre. The growth and variety of feminist approaches in Shakespeare studies has been complemented and supported by productivity in feminist theory, women's history, the study of women's relationship to language, and of course the study of women's writing. There is still some opposition –indeed an identifiable backlash¹⁷– and one still finds oneself fighting patronising assumptions that women only know about women, and that feminist criticism is only concerned with female characters, but we have come a long way in twenty years and we should allow ourselves (albeit briefly and modestly) to celebrate that.

A list of the achievements of feminist criticism would for me include the following:

1. Since *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* which looked at Shakespeare's works in the context

of the history of contemporary ideas and assumptions about women, drawing on non-literary texts to do so, feminist studies have contributed to the assumption that works of art can and should be treated within a social frame of reference.

2. While sharing some features of their approach with new historicists, feminist critics have also provided a critique of new historicism in important ways: some of us have noticed and objected to the exclusion of gender issues in some new historicist work, and the concentration on male power relationships, and we have resisted the notion that subversion is a calculated form of license, always in the end contained. In doing this we have provided evidence of the possibility of political and social change in the past, and hope that it can also happen in the present and future.

3. Feminist critics have changed what we read: there are more texts by women of the Renaissance available now, and more work on women as readers, patrons and audiences. Publishers in Britain and North America are responding to the demands of feminist critics and their students for more and different texts from those traditionally taught.

4. Feminist critics have changed how we read. Some of us have contributed to reader response criticism which sees reading as a complex interaction between writer, text and reader in which the gender of the reader is no longer irrelevant or ignored. The notion of the author's 'intention' is challenged rather than assumed.

5. The performance tradition has been affected, with feminist approaches enlivening debate and making new interpretations possible. More women (including some feminists) are getting the chance to direct plays (Deborah Warner for the National Theatre in London, Gale Edwards for the Royal Shakespeare Company, Jane Howell for the BBC Shakespeare series). Books are being published which take the views of female performers seriously, and we are discovering the possibilities of feminist theatre history.¹⁸

6. Our perceptions of dramatic texts have been changed by feminist work on women's access to language and women's use of language. We are opening up discussion of the gendering of rhetoric, public and private voices, the stereotypes of the 'bad' shrew and the 'good' silent woman. (The 'feminine' voice itself was clearly crucial for the boy actors of Shakespeare's time.)

We should not however be complacent. There is a lot still to do. Feminist critics in Shakespeare studies, as in Renaissance studies more generally, are only just beginning to explore the issue of racial difference in literary texts and the participation of white women (including some of our precious, recently rediscovered women writers) in seventeenth-century colonialism.¹⁹ We have much to learn about women's contribution to the history of the theatre as a cultural institution, not just as performers (and, later, writers and directors), but as shareholders, patrons and audiences. We are still on very shaky ground when we try to investigate questions relating to women's literacy and women's reading during the early modern period. We have not really taken class differences on board: are we comfortable with the thought that we ourselves are an elite group of privileged women focussing our attention on other elite women (as fictional or real-life characters) against a background in which the vast majority of women have always been and continue to be under-achievers?

We also have a number of difficult issues to address within our own profession. Some feminist critics feel uneasy at the attention still paid to Shakespeare as the dominant figure in a white male canon and would prefer specialists in the period to devote more time to women writers. Some are having problems with the conversion of women's studies into gender studies and the shift in political focus this has

implied; we welcome the addition of gay and lesbian studies to the academic agenda, but, looking around us at the academic institutions in which we work, we are not always convinced that gay men in particular can claim to have been oppressed in the same way or to the same extent as women. We are aware that some women are uncomfortable with the language of the academy itself which has its origins in a long male-dominated tradition of education in rhetoric and the classics, and we need to make space for other modes of writing, reading and speaking which can be valued alongside traditional modes.

Finally, I had better return to *Hamlet*. The editing of Shakespeare does not feature on my list of feminist achievements, but, with any luck, it will not for much longer be true to say that '*Hamlet* has never been edited by a woman'. I am currently attempting to 'write [myself] into the bibliographical history of the play' by preparing a new edition for the Arden Shakespeare, of which the all-new third series was officially launched in March 95. The first three volumes to appear are all edited by men, but as one of the General Editors of this series I am very pleased to report that we have commissioned nine volumes from women working on their own and a further four (including *Hamlet*) from women working in collaborative partnerships with men. This compares with only one female-edited volume in the Arden second series, and a maximum of three female-edited texts in competing series.

It will make a difference. (At least I am sure it may be so in Denmark.) Already, in the early stages of the work, I am inevitably focussing on gender issues in the play. This will of course include a reappraisal of the roles of Gertrude and Ophelia, both in the text and in the extensive afterlife of the play on stage and screen, in critical and cultural history. But it will also involve work on the extent to which Hamlet is seen as an 'effeminate' character, by himself in his misogynistic chiding of himself as one who 'Must like a whore unpack my heart with words/And fall a-cursing like a very drab' (II.ii.584-5), and in the long tradition of female performers of the role. And I shall investigate the underestimation of the play's politics in Anglo-American tradition (they have always been prominent in Eastern Europe) and how this is currently being sustained by new historicism's fascination with absolute male power and its privileging of Jacobean over Elizabethan texts.²⁰

Women working in the Renaissance area must of course concern themselves with what women have written, and must recover those texts and make them available to today's readers. But we must also play our part in rereading the male-authored canon and ensuring that the traditionally male-dominated areas of literary studies become more accessible to women. We can also attempt to recover the lost contributions of past generations of women and do our best to foster present efforts. Returning to the title of Juliet Dusinberre's new Preface, 'Beyond the Battle?', and its allusion to the Witches in *Macbeth*, those of us who remember the battles we fought in the 1970s to put women writers and feminist criticism onto academic syllabuses might well ask each other 'Is the battle lost or won?' I would reply 'both', equivocating like the Witches, but I really believe we have gained more than we have lost and it isn't over yet.

NOTES

¹ *Shakespeare Restored*, London: v-vi.

² Gary Taylor, 1988: "Textual and Sexual Criticism: A crux in *The Comedy of Errors*", *Renaissance Drama* XIX: 195-225, p.195.

- ³ In Mark Thornton Burnett and John Manning, eds., 1994: *New Essays on 'Hamlet'*. New York, AMS Press: 189-205, pp.202-3.
- ⁴ Harold Jenkins, 1982: London, Methuen (now Routledge).
- ⁵ G. R. Hibbard, 1987: Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- ⁶ Philip Edwards, 1985: Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- ⁷ T. J. B. Spencer, 1980: Harmondsworth, Penguin.
- ⁸ Elaine Showalter, 1985: "Representing Ophelia: women, madness, and the responsibilities of feminist criticism", in Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman, eds., *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*. London, Routledge: 77-94. Juliana Schiesari, 1992: *The Gendering of Melancholia*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press.
- ⁹ Elizabeth Howe, 1992: *The First English Actresses*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- ¹⁰ Quoted by Michael Dobson, 1992: *The Making of the National Poet*. Oxford, Clarendon Press: 154.
- ¹¹ For further details on and quotations from the work of these eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women, see Ann Thompson and Sasha Roberts, *Women Readers of Shakespeare, 1660-1900* (working title), forthcoming from Manchester University Press in 1996.
- ¹² The original essay is unpaginated in the June 1884 issue of *Manhattan*, but this is on what should be p.9.
- ¹³ 'The Character of Hamlet's Mother' originally appeared in 1957 in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 8: 201-6. Heilbrun wrote this when she reprinted it in 1990 in *Hamlet's Mother and Other Women*. New York, Columbia University Press: 2.
- ¹⁴ Juliet Dusinberre. 1975: London, Macmillan.
- ¹⁵ Philip C. Kolin. 1991: New York, Garland.
- ¹⁶ Quoted from Dusinberre's typescript, p.2. I am most grateful to have had access to this prior to publication.
- ¹⁷ See, for example, Richard Levin, 1988: "Feminist Thematics and Shakespearean Tragedy", *PMLA* 103: 125-38, and Brian Vickers, 1993: "Feminist Stereotypes" in *Appropriating Shakespeare: Contemporary Critical Quarrels*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press: 325-71.
- ¹⁸ See, for example, Carol Rutter, 1988: *Clamorous Voices: Shakespeare's Women Today*. London, Women's Press, and Penny Gay, 1994: *As She Likes It: Shakespeare's Unruly Women*. London, Routledge.
- ¹⁹ See Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker, eds., 1994: *Women, 'Race', and Writing in the Early Modern Period*. London, Routledge.
- ²⁰ See also my essay on "Feminist Theory and the Practice of Editing" in David Greetham ed. 1996: *Margins of the Text*. Forthcoming from Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press.