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Apply *one* of the theoretical approaches you have studied (Practical Criticism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, Feminist Criticism, Marxist Criticism or Post-colonialism) to *two* of your set texts.

In this essay, I will try to apply Feminist Criticism to *The Wife of Bath* and to *Hamlet*. I will first introduce the theory itself and its general methods, then use it on each of these two texts; obviously, only the early type of Feminist Criticism can be applied, since the authors are male, although I may apply some of the ideas of the French Feminists, in particular the notions of the 'Imaginary' and the 'Symbolic', or the 'phallogocentrism'. As a basis for my reflections, I rely on different essays taken from the New Casebooks on *Hamlet* and *Chaucer*, as well as the methodologies described by P.Barry, and the seminal texts gathered in *Modern Literary Theory* (ed. Rice, Waugh).

Although feminism itself is a relatively old concept, emerging at the end of the eighteenth century with such figures as Olympe de Gouges (and her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen*, in 1791) or Mary Wollstonecraft, and leading up to seminal books like *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir (1949), it really took off as a major political and critical movement in the 1960s. Literary and cultural criticism was central from the start, focussing on the representation and place of women in literature, and then evolving into reflections on works by female writers and on the language of women. Feminist criticism encompasses a range of positions that are not necessarily homogeneous, although it is possible to distinguish three general trends:

feminist critique, gynocriticism and French feminism. It has links with other major theories, like Post-structuralism, Marxism and Psychoanalysis (mostly in its Lacanian avatar).

Feminist critique is associated with the early wave, in the late 1960s; it concentrates on the representation of women by male authors, and its main figures would be Millet, Greer, and Mitchell. It is interested in gender as a construct, in exposing the ways in which the 'patriarchy' shapes women into a particular feminine mould, the ideological biases propagated by the literary 'canon'. In *The Female Eunuch*, Germaine Greer denounces that patriarchy, which has castrated women by turning them into 'Others'. The next wave is gynocriticism, lead by Elaine Showalter (and also Gilbert and Gubar (*The Madwoman in the Attic*, 1979); it concentrates on female writers and the female subculture, which has been repressed by the dominant male establishment and must be brought to the fore, turned into a female canon. Finally, another main phase is associated with French criticism, whose main proponents are Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous. This movement takes its inspiration from both Post-structuralism and Lacanian Psychoanalysis; it focuses on female language ('Ecriture féminine') and, through it, female world-view (Kristeva's Semiotic vs. Symbolic). Because Chaucer and Shakespeare are male, I must mainly use the earlier form of Feminist Criticism, although it is also interesting to apply some of the linguistic aspects introduced by the French feminists, since male writers may also, consciously or unconsciously, give their characters a female voice.

Any attempt at Feminist Criticism about Chaucer must take into account the historical context of his work, as Jill Mann does. It is thus anachronistic to assign 'feminist' or 'anti-feminist' intentions to the author. Nevertheless, as Mann notes, Chaucer's great originality is to turn the anti-feminist notions of his time on their head; in a way, it defines the Wife by opposition to these principles (without giving her a voice of her own). With this device, the Wife is shown to be both master and slave to the concept of 'a good wife' of her time; although she seems to oppose the prejudices of the male establishment, she does so by re-using their stereotypes, and her Tale rings like a submission to the traditional position of women in society as essentially passive objects of 'courtly love'. Violence and belligerence remain the tools of male domination, be it in the case of Jankin or of the humbled knight; women must get their way through shrewdness, manipulation or compromise. In exchange of the largely token gift of 'maistrye' from the husband, the wife must pledge fidelity and kindness. As Mann underlines, the Wife's Tale addresses the question of 'maistrye' in an ambiguous way: the rapist knight is humiliated by the symbolic rape of having to marry a foul hag, and his surrender of control is rewarded by her transformation into a beautiful woman. Although this tale may point the way to true reciprocity in male-female relationship, the Wife quickly turns it to her advantage at the end.

Another interesting aspect of *The Wife of Bath* from the point of view of Feminist Criticism is the distinction between authority and experience, the masculine and feminine world-views, and 'phallogocentrism', which is the subject of B.R.Strauss' essay, 'Subversive discourse of the Wife of Bath' (in *New Casebooks: Chaucer*, p.126).

Authority is the attribute of patriarchy, relying on canonical texts like the Bible to build an ideology that constructs a well-defined role for women. The male discourse is dominant, hence the notion of 'phallogocentrism', an aggregate of 'logocentrism', the fallacy consisting in forgetting that reality is constructed by language, and 'phallocentrism', the preponderance of the male public world-view, the categorisation of woman as 'Other' and the ignorance of the female private sphere. It is significant that the main strategy of the Wife of Bath is to oppose her experience, gained in the private area, to the authority of male clerics: she has the practical knowledge, hence she has the power. It is also important that she exercises that power by her speech, by mirroring the male discourse: she talks like a man, thereby stealing the 'Phallus', the power, a symbolic castration illustrated by her ripping pages from Jankin's book, or the reversal of roles where the dominant knight becomes dominated by women (the queen, then his wife). That symbolic castration is actually enacted by the Wife on three of her husbands, who she seems to have killed by sexual exhaustion! The Wife of Bath is a self-confessed manipulator: as Straus says, she is 'a woman skilled in spinning two kinds of yarn, a weaver of cloth and of fictions'. She proclaims the fact that women are liars to better ridicule the pretensions of male authority. In a way, *The Wife of Bath*, be it in the Prologue or the Tale itself, may be seen as the illustration of a woman reclaiming the male discourse, asserting her rights to her own language, her own authority.

I will now consider *Hamlet*, using the four following essays (all from *New Casebooks: Hamlet*): Rebecca Smith's 'A Heart Cleft in Twain: The Dilemma of Shakespeare's Gertrude' (ch.6), Marilyn French's 'Chaste Constancy in Hamlet' (ch.7),

Elaine Showalter's 'Representing Ophelia' (ch.8) and David Leverenz's 'The Woman in Hamlet: an Interpersonal View' (ch.9), as well as Olivier's film version of the play as an example of interpretation of the text. *Hamlet* has only two female characters, Gertrude and Ophelia, who in terms of dialogue seem to be quite marginal: the main focus, obviously, is Hamlet himself, and detracts the attention of the audience from these two figures. As Smith argues for Gertrude, and Showalter for Ophelia, they have both been unfairly misrepresented by critics or interpretations in the past, and their importance has often been downplayed. Gertrude's sexuality and lust have been overestimated, while Ophelia's role has been neglected, as she was dismissed as a simple object. It is however possible to read in both characters something quite different: the opposition of feminine and masculine traditions to male and female beings where the question could be: to be or not to be a 'man', that is, to act or not to act in a 'manly' fashion.

Smith tries to rehabilitate Gertrude by pointing out that the text itself does not show a lustful woman whose unbridled sexuality is the original sin, the cause of all the following, but a 'nurturing, loving, careful mother and wife'. Her argument, however, could be pushed even further: Gertrude is queen, mother, wife and lover. It is interesting to see Olivier's interpretation, where she is pictured as a matronly, relaxed and motherly figure, trying to share her love equally between Claudius and Hamlet; far from overpowering, her sexuality seems natural, be it in the kisses she gives to Hamlet or the intimacy she seems to have with Claudius. She has far more influence than generally acknowledged: it is only through her that Claudius can claim the throne, and although he tells Laertes that he cannot touch Hamlet because of his love of her, one suspects that his

grasp on the kingdom is largely due to her good will. Moreover, Hamlet only listens to her, and although he violently attacks her in her bedchamber, she never really admits her guilt or promises not to go to her husband's bed: on the other hand, she asks him to 'use some gentle entertainment to Laertes' before their fencing match, a demand with which he complies, as he had accepted earlier not to go back to Wittenberg. She – and significantly not the king - interrupts Polonius, asking for 'more matter, less art'. Her soothing speeches may be more than maternal care: she is a wise compromiser who is inclined to use private and quiet diplomacy where others try public and brash posturing.

In a similar way, Showalter attempts to restore Ophelia to the position she deserves. Like everybody else, Ophelia is forced to play a certain role in this court: to her father and brother she must act like an obedient and submissive young woman, to the king she only has to be a 'pretty lady', a mere insignificant object of desire whose main usefulness is a bait, and to Hamlet she must pretend to be a chaste maiden. Because she does not have the freedom of Gertrude, who as queen and wife has control over Claudius and Polonius, and as mother over Hamlet, Ophelia is forced into submission to her father and brother's authority and to Hamlet's violence. She is denied by the patriarchy the only escape that could give her some freedom: her marriage to Hamlet, which Gertrude had wished (as she says at Ophelia's funeral). Hamlet's obsession with chaste constancy (as underlined by French), exacerbated by the Ghost, is more successful in Ophelia than in Gertrude, because she actually seems to love him but must repress that love. She complies as long as a remote possibility of a marriage to Hamlet remains; but when he kills her father, she knows that her brother, in revenge, will want to kill Hamlet ('My

brother shall know of it', IV.5, line 70). Denied self-expression in the Symbolic realm of the court, she finds refuge in the Imaginary, the Semiotic: at last, she can speak her own language, but for the other characters this free expression is nothing, it is but madness. As Leverenz explains, at the court of Denmark there is no room for 'unmanly grief': madness, be it Hamlet's or Ophelia's, is feminine, as is suicide or the contemplation of it. Revenge is what is expected of a man, flesh is not allowed to melt, blood and not tears is what is called for. Books are feminine, swords and daggers is what Hamlet must use.

The theory of Feminist Criticism provides some valuable tools in the study of texts like *Hamlet* or *The Wife of Bath*; it attracts the attention not only to the representation of female characters who may be unfairly neglected by other theories, but also to the female angle, the way a woman might read and interpret the text. As a study of the power of women it has some links with Marxist Criticism, and in the analysis of language it connects naturally with the Lacanian trend of Psychoanalytic Criticism. It reveals hidden depths in the text that the other theories may fail to address.

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