*“Dancing through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism” (1980)*

*Annette Kolodny*

* **What is a “Feminist literary Criticism?”**

🡪 In the late 60s, someone might say it involves:

- Exposing the sexual stereotyping of women in literature and our literary criticism - Demonstrating the inadequacy of established critical schools/methods to deal fairly or with works written by women

🡪 But through the development of Feminist ideology, this has changed some bit (without degrading the work of Ellman who laid a foundation.

- Whereas previous generations focused on exclusion from authorship (such as Woolf) or a lack of “good” representation (instead of as whores, bitches, muses, and heroines dead in childbirth), feminist ideology has now taken up this worry and legitimized these concerns

- Now, looking at this issue from a structural perspective in the very discipline of literature. Answering question: how and who are choosing what goes into our literary histories, and trying to ensure that women’s voices are included.

- this is an act of survival: What was at stake was not so much literature or criticism as such, but the historical, social, and ethical consequences of women's participation in, or exclusion from, either enterprise.”

* **What has been questioned out of this developing criticism?**

🡪 Our established canons

🡪 Our aesthetic criteria

🡪 Our interpretative strategies and reading habits

🡪 Most of all, ourselves as critics and as teachers.

* **A general development in this scholarship: The Rescue of “forgotten” authors**

🡪 This is the return to circulation of previously lost or otherwise ignored works by women writers. Have to go to the literary archives to “resurrect them”

🡪This includes Harding Davis's 1861 novella, *Life in the Iron Mills* and Charlotte

Perkins Gilman's 1892 *The Yellow Wallpaper* (both republished in 1972 and 1973)

🡪 This “phenomenon promised a radical reshaping of our concepts of literary history and, at the very least, a new chapter in understanding the development of women's literary tradition”

🡪“In rereading with our students these previously lost works, we inevitably raised perplexing questions as to the reasons for their disappearance from the canons of "major works," and we worried over the aesthetic and critical criteria by which they had been accorded diminished status”

* **Were women just developing their own tradition? Is there a unit or connection between the increasing number of works “rediscovered”?**

🡪 Some critics who worked on their own specialized, national literature of one kind or another or historical periods were particularly interested in this question

- EX: Baym looks at the women writers who were dominate throughout America in the nineteenth century and some British feminist critics look at those women writers who should be considered worthy of canonization

🡪 These critics began trying to label a “body of work” by women that could serve as a female counter-tradition.

🡪 looking for possible inherent differences in this counter-tradition, such as when Spacks describes the “inevitable difference in the literary emphases and subject matters of female and male writers”

🡪 In Showalter’s discussion of the “female literary tradition,” she discusses the "subculture [of women writers] within the framework of a larger society”

* **How does this affect male writers?**

🡪 Male writers have been scrutinized too, as women writers are reconsidered and reread

🡪Trying to examine the different ways certain power relations are inscribed in literary and critical texts (power relations where men often wield various forms of influence over females). Especially looking at what has been considered “natural”

🡪 The conventions that inform individual texts often greatly affect women, so it is important to examine those, sometimes even more important that looking at the individual texts themselves

- Ex: "the two suitors convention” which – even in the hands of women writers – seems to imply “the inferiority and necessary subordination of women”

- Jean E. Kennard points out that “the symbolic nature of the marriage which conventionally concludes such novels "indicates the adjustment of the protagonist to society's values, a condition which is equated with her maturity.”

- Have to deconstruct this convention in order to see new perspectives

* **Literature as a social institution**

🡪 Literature is not only embedded within its own literary tradition

🡪 Literature is also embedded within “the particular physical and mental artifacts of the society from which it comes”

🡪 “The power relations inscribed in the form of conventions within our literary inheritance, these critics argue, reify the encodings of those same power relations in the culture at large” […] thus they need to be examined and dismantled

* **Defensive Rereading**

🡪 “Whether its focus be upon the material or the imaginative contexts of literary invention; single texts or entire canons; the relations between authors, genres, or historical circumstances; lost authors or well-known names, the variety and diversity of all feminist literary criticism finally coheres in its stance of almost defensive rereading”

🡪 Need to resist the sexism embedded in texts and their historic interpretative methods

🡪 This includes re-examining linguistics itself, as some feminists “study ‘language as a symbolic system closely tied to a patriarchal social structure.”

🡪 Note that language isn’t gender-neutral and is often “imbued with our sex-inflected cultural values.” So if male readers find them outside a symbolic system that constitutes female experiences in women’s writings, they will dismiss them as undecipherable, meaningless, or trivial. (potentially even keeping them out of the canons of “major authors”

🡪 “At the same time, women writers, coming into a tradition of literary language

and conventional forms already appropriated, for centuries, to the purposes of male expression, will be forced virtually to "wrestle with that language in an effort "to remake it as a language adequate to our conceptual processes."

* **The Minefield**

🡪 “To have attempted so many difficult questions and to have accomplished so much […] in so short a time, should certainly have secured feminist literary criticism an honored berth […] [in] […] "critical analysis." Instead of being welcomed onto the train, however, we've been forced to negotiate a minefield.”

🡪 Criticized for lacking definition and coherence because there are so many different things that need to be tackled

🡪 Also, people try to negatively associate them with Marxist critics because of the way they examine literature in relation to (patriarchal) cultural value systems

\*\*\* “If we are scholars dedicated to rediscovering a lost body of writings by women, then our finds are questioned on aesthetic grounds. And if we are critics, determined to practice revisionist readings, it is claimed that our focus is too narrow, and our results are only distortions or, worse still, polemical misreading” \*\*\*

🡪 In essence though, the worry that feminists “distort texts” or “threaten the great Western literary tradition itself” just come from the historical privileging of males; the sense of power and significance they feel in the world.

* **How can one navigate this Minefield?**

🡪 The first most important thing is to understand the nature of the challenge – that being the rootedness of patriarchy that does not want to give up its ground/power

🡪 “The ways in which objections to our work are usually posed, of course, serve to obscure their deeper motivations” (deeper motivations listed above)

* **One Mine to Navigate: “If she was worth reading, she’d stand the test of time.”**

🡪”The canon, for him, conferred excellence; Chopin's exclusion demonstrated only her lesser worth”

🡪 Problem with canonization is that it puts works beyond question of establishing merit. Once a work has been labelled “canonized” its merit is taken for granted. Students then find more and more ways to articulate its “genius”. This is both circular and self-serving

🡪This leaves us to endlessly respond to the overwhelming male presence among canonical authors.

🡪 And also the testament that their canonization was only “an accident of history and never intentionally sexist” coupled with claims about their “obvious” aesthetic merit … But this is to obscure rather than to expose the territory being protected.

* **Three Crucial Propositions:**

(1) Literary history (and with that, the historicity of literature) is a fiction

(2) insofar as we are taught how to read, what we engage are not texts but paradigms; and

(3) that since the grounds upon which we assign aesthetic value to texts are never infallible, unchangeable, or universal, we must reexamine not only our aesthetics but, as well, the inherent biases and assumptions informing the critical methods which (in part) shape our aesthetic responses

* **Proposition 1: Literary history (and with that, the historicity of literature) is a fiction**

🡪 How is a Canon meant to function: “As a model by which to chart the continuities and discontinuities, as well as the influences upon and the interconnections between works, genres, and author.”

🡪 This model is not absolute; it is of our own making.

🡪 The reigning critical ideology will transform the criteria for inclusion and exclusion.

🡪 “Indeed, whenever in the previous century of English and American literary scholarship one alternative replaced the other, we saw dramatic alterations in canonical "wisdom."”

🡪 “This suggests, then, that our sense of a "literary history" and, by extension, our confidence in a "historical" canon, is rooted not so much in any definitive understanding of the past, as it is in our need to call up and utilize the past on behalf of a better under-

standing of the present”

🡪 “Feminist literary theorists implicitly introduce the observation that our choices and evaluations of current literature have the effect either of solidifying or of reshaping our sense of the past. […] So, were the larger critical community to begin to seriously attend to the recent outpouring of fine literature by women, this would surely be ac- companied by a concomitant researching of the past, by literary historians, in order to account for the present phenomenon. […] \*\*\* I am arguing, in other words, that the choices we make in the present inevitably alter our sense of the past that led to them.”\*\*\*

🡪 On Shakespeare:

- “Related to this is the feminist challenge to that patently mendacious critical fallacy that we read the "classics" in order to reconstruct the past "the way it really was," and that we read Shakespeare and Milton in order to apprehend the meanings that they

intended.”

- But we don’t know there intentions and read them under our current patriarchal system. \*\*\* “We never really reconstruct the past in its own terms.” \*\*\*

- \*\*\*All of literary history is a fiction which we daily recreate as we reread it.\*\*\*

* **Proposition 2: Insofar as we are taught how to read, what we engage are not texts but paradigm**

🡪 “We appropriate meaning from a text according to what we need (or desire) or, in other words, according to the critical assumptions or predispositions (conscious or not) that we bring to it”

🡪”Reading is a highly socialized – or learned – activity. What makes it so exciting, of course, is that it can be constantly releamed and refined, so as to provide either an individual or an entire reading community, over time, with infinite variations of the same text.”

🡪 Often our reading habits before stuck though.

🡪 “Graduate schools, at their best, are training grounds for competing interpretive paradigms or reading techniques”

🡪 Paradise Lost:

- I learned to take great pleasure in Paradise Lost, even though as both a Jew and a feminist, I can subscribe neither to its theology nor to its hierarchy of sexual valuation. If, within its own terms (as I have been taught to understand them), the text manipulates my sensibilities and moves me to pleasure – as I will affirm it

does – then, at least in part, that must be because, in spite of my real-world alienation from many of its basic tenets, I have been able to enter that text through interpretive strategies which allow me to displace less comfortable observations with others to which I have been taught pleasurably to attend.”

-To question the source of the aesthetic pleasures we've gained from reading Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and so on, does not imply that we must deny those pleasures. It means only that aesthetic response is once more invested with epistemological, ethical, and moral concerns. It means, in other words, [turning away from readings] that […] insist upon the inherent (or even inspired) perfection of Milton's figurative language but fail to note the consequences, for Eve, of her specifically gender-marked weakness, which, like the flowers to which she attends, requires "propping up.”

🡪 “When we consider the implications of these observations for the processes of canon formation and for the assignment of aesthetic value, we find ourselves locked in a chicken-and-egg dilemma, unable easily to distinguish as primary the importance of what we read as opposed to how we have learned to read it.”

🡪 “Though the argument is not usually couched in precisely these terms, a considerable segment of the most recent feminist rereadings of women writers allows the conclusion that, where those authors have dropped out of sight, the reason may be due not to any lack of merit in the work but, instead, to an incapacity of predominantly male readers to properly interpret and appreciate women's texts-due, in large part, to a lack of prior acquintance.”

🡪 Think of Bloom:

- “The fictions which women compose about the worlds they inhabit may owe a debt to prior, influential works by other women or, simply enough, to the daily experience of the writer herself or, more usually, to some combination of the two.”

- BUT “The reader coming upon such fiction, with knowledge of neither its informing literary traditions nor its real-world contexts, will thereby find himself hard-pressed, though he may recognize the words on the page, to competently decipher its intended meanings.”

- Male writers write of what they cannot understand.

🡪 “What, then, is the fate of the women writer whose competent reading community is composed only of member of her own sex.? And what, then, the response of the male critic who, on first looking into Virginia Woolf or Doris Lessing, finds all of the interpretative strategies at his command inadequate to a full and pleasurable deciphering of their pages? Historically, the result has been the diminished status of women’s products and their consequent absence from major canons.”

🡪 Interpreting language is not sexually neutral; nor the language system itself.

* **Proposition 3: Since the grounds upon which we assign aesthetic value to texts are never infallible, unchangeable, or universal, we must re- examine not only our aesthetics but, as well, the inherent biases and assumptions informing the critical methods which (in part) shape our aesthetic responses**

🡪 “The emphasis of my remarks shifts the act of critical judgment from assigning aesthetic valuations to texts and directs it, instead, to ascertaining the adequacy of any interpretive paradigm to a full reading of both female and male writing.”

🡪 Calling into question the established norms used to evaluate literary works

🡪 Need new standards to evaluate how we evaluate essentially

🡪 But not discarding aesthetic valuation generally

🡪 “Seeking to discover how aesthetic value is assigned in the first place

🡪 “What appears to be a dispute about aesthetic merit is, in reality, a dispute about the con- texts of judgment.”

🡪 “We have had enough pronouncements of aesthetic valuation for a time; it is now our task to evaluate the imputed norms and normative reading patterns that, in part, led to those pronouncements”

* **What is the greatest mine in the minefield?**

🡪 The idea that Feminist critical theory is inadequate because it does not have the same systematic coherence as Marxist or Psychoanalytic studies.

🡪 But the diversity is advantageous, and there is no one way to read a text.

🡪 Pluralist approach

\*\*\*\*\* KEY THINK AUERBACH:

“So, whether we tend to treat a text as a mimesis, in which words are taken to be recreating or representing viable worlds; or whether we prefer to treat a text as a kind of equation of communication, in which decipherable mes-sages are passed from writers to readers; and whether we locate meaning as inherent in the text, the act of reading, or in some collaboration between reader and text-whatever our predilection, let us not generate from it a straitjacket that limits the scope of possible analysis. Rather, let us generate an ongoing dialogue of competing potential possibilities-among feminists and, as well, between feminist and nonfeminist critics.”

**Questions – Feminism: Kolodny ; Husvedt ; Beard**

Annette Kolodny, “Dancing Through the Minefield”

1. Annette Kolodny describes the logic of canonization as “circular and self-serving” (7-8). How does this circular logic work? Does this logic constrain or enable feminist critique?

2. Do you see connections between Kolodny’s understanding of literary history (as a fiction) and Eliot’s idea of the tradition? Differences? Similarities?

3. On what grounds does Kolodny propose a “playful pluralism” (19) as an appropriate attitude for feminist criticism? What are the alternatives to such a playfully pluralist approach?

4. How does Kolodny conceive of the relation between literature and society (that is, between textual and ideological codes)? Can you compare to this position to that of Auerbach?

5. Does Kolodny’s argument imply that male readers are unable to properly understand texts by female authors, and vice versa? Why (not)? What approaches could lead to better understanding?

Siri Hustvedt, “No Competition”

1. Hustvedt starts by quoting a survey from Goodreads about the different audiences to books by male and female writers. Does she manage to explain this difference? How?

2. Does Hustvedt think a literary text is ‘sexed’ or ‘gendered’ in a particular way? What do you think?

3. What is for Hustvedt the relation between a literary text and society?

4. Hustvedt refers to practices of implicit bias with regard to gender as ‘the masculine enhancement effect’. Can you find other examples of such implicit bias in our culture/literary system? Can you perhaps also find examples of the reverse: implicit bias that works to the detriment of men in our culture/literature.

5. Does Hustvedt see a solution to sexism or a way out of the workings of gendered prejudice and implicit bias in our (literary) culture?

Mary Beard, “The Public Voice of Women” and “Women in Power”

1. Which strand(s) of feminist criticism does Mary Beard engage in in these essays?

2. How does she construe Western culture and the Western literary tradition?

3. What does it reveal about contemporary culture that we still refer back to classical myths and characters?

4. What is Beard’s take on the relationship between literature/culture and society?

5. What are the solutions Beard proposes to the two problems she addresses in these essays (the disjunction between women and power/public speech)? Which solution does she prefer?

6. Compare Hustvedt’s discussion of implicit bias with that of Beard.