# Feminism and the Literary Critic

## Margret Andersen

The literary critic who first used feminism as a criterion was, to my knowledge, Christine de Pisan. Born in 1364, she also was the first woman ever to live, as a widow and with her children, on the money she earned with her pen. This outspoken feminist cannot easily be dismissed: in France, she is the first critic to speak of Dante. Her quarrel however--she was involved in the first querelle des femmes--was not with Dante but rather with Jehan de Meun, author of the later part of the Roman de la Rose. She says of him:

> And Jehan de Meun in le Roman de la Rose,
> What a long story! What a difficult work!
> Clear and obscure thoughts
> Has he put there . . . .1

To her, the Roman de la Rose is a textbook on the art of deceiving and seducing women, "a book on the art of great deception/ . . . ./ to deceive many a virgin/ is its aim . . . .2 In "Playdoyer pour les femmes," Christine de Pisan objects in defence of women to the unfair description of the feminine character given by such writers as Jehan de Meun:

> Thus women are often ill-spoken of by many people and quite unjustly.
> It's word of mouth and also often written . . . .
> Let gentlemanly preachers talk
> I say . . .
> That woman's nature is most generous. 3

The author of la Cité des Dames is convinced that woman has as many qualities as man, that lack of physical strength does not imply lack of intelligence; but that as long as woman is kept out of all serious discussions, she cannot develop an independent mind. Of course, there are exceptions, and in le Ditié sur Jeanne d'Arc, Christine de Pisan writes enthusiastically about Joan's exceptional achievements:

> Hé! What honour for the feminine Sex!
> . . . .
> By a woman is assured and regained
> What a hundred thousand men could not win . . . .
> . . . .
> A young girl of fifteen years!
> Is this not something against nature?4

From Christine de Pisan on, feminist criticism tries to make its voice heard.

In Protection for Women (1589), Jane Anger speaks of the necessity of feminist criticism as male critics "suppose that there is not one amongst us who can or dare reprove their slanders."5 Not only does she reprove the slanders of misogynous writers, she lashes out at male writers in general for their conceit, false rhetoric, lack of substance: "The desire that every man has to show his true vein in writing is unspeakable, and their minds are so carried away with the manner, as no care at all is had of the matter. They run so

into rhetoric as often times they overrun the bounds of their wits and go they know not whither."6

Anne Finch (1661-1720), who published her first volume of poetry anonymously, wrote about the woman writer facing her prejudiced critics and being forced to become a writer in hiding. She, by the way, also points out a need for what we nowadays call Women's Studies:

> Did I my lines intend for publick view
> How many censures wou'd their faults persue
> Some wou'd, because such words they do affect,
> Cry they're insipid, empty, uncorrect.
> And many have attain'd, dull and untaught
> The name of Witt, only by finding fault.
> True judges might condemn their want of witt,
> And all might say, they're by a woman writt.
> Alas! a woman that attempts the pen,
> Such an intruder on the rights of men,
> Such a presumptuous creature, is esteem'd,
> The fault can by no vertue be redeem'd.
> They tell us, we mistake our sex and way;
> Good breeding, fassion, dancing, dressing, play
> Are the accomplishments we should desire;
> To write or read, or think, or to enquire
> Wou'd cloud our beauty, and exaust our time,
> And interrupt the conquests of our prime;
> Whilst the dull mannage, of a servile house,
> Is held by some, our utmost art, and use.7

Mme de Staël, the French critic forced into hiding by Napoleon, notes "the changes wrought in literature"8 by women. She sees romanticism not only as a gift of the North, but also as having developed under the influence of women. She remarks that Shakespeare could treat his woman protagonists in any way he wanted, and points out that social conventions, of which Shakespeare was free, later forced writers to create women characters corresponding to society's view of women: "The customs of the English regarding women were not yet formed in Shakespeare's time; political disorder had precluded social conventions. The position of women in tragedies was thus left entirely to the will of the author; so Shakespeare, in speaking of women, sometimes used the noblest language that love could inspire and at others, words in the worst and most vulgar taste."9 Again, here is a female critic and a feminist who looks at women with objectivity and great interest. One chapter of Mme de Staël's

book De la Littérature (1800) deals with the question of "Women who Cultivate Literature." Here she speaks of the reluctance with which the public bestows its approval upon a female writer and of man reducing woman "to the most absurd mediocrity."10 Thus any creative woman becomes "an unusual woman. Say no more."11

Do critics lose their objectivity when their feminism becomes a criterion? When we read Virginia Woolf's essay on "The Lives of the Obscure" we know that this is not necessarily so. She tells the story of Laetitia Pinkerton who "so imbued with the old traditions of her sex . . . wrote, as ladies talk, to give pleasure . . . . Thus Laetitia is in the great tradition of English women of letters."12 Virginia Woolf presents Mrs. Pinkerton with quite some irony and certainly with all necessary objectivity.

It is evident from this brief survey that a tradition of feminist critique exists. With the greater accessibility to education for women and with the increasing tide of feminism in the twentieth century, such criticism has become more widely represented, more universally known. England has Virginia Woolf, France Simone de Beauvoir. And North America? The writings of Diane Trilling, Margaret Lawrence, Kate Millett, Florence Howe, Margaret Atwood, and--last not least--Mary Ellmann provide the substance for an analysis of feminist critique in North America.

What really is feminist criticism? What are its flaws, its temptations, its qualities? Is it in any way valid, or maybe even necessary?

Often, it is a retort to what Mary Ellmann so wittingly calls 'phallic criticism,' to a criticism that Virginia Woolf, for instance, feared greatly.

> I will here sum up my impressions before publishing A Room of One's Own. It is a little ominous that Morgan won't review it. It makes me suspect that there is a shrill feminine tone in it which my intimate friends will dislike. I forecast, then, that I shall get no criticism, except of the evasive jocular kind, from Lytton, Roger and Morgan. (He wrote yesterday, 3 Dec., and said he very much liked it); that the press will be kind and talk of its charm and sprightliness; also I shall be attacked for a feminist and hinted at for a Sapphist; Sybil will ask me to luncheon; I shall get good many letters from young women. I am afraid it will not be taken seriously. Mrs. Woolf is so accomplished a writer that all she says makes easy reading . . . this very very feminine logic . . . a book to be put in the hands of girls.13

The rebuttal of 'phallic criticism' can sometimes be extremely funny and Mary Ellmann's Thinking about Women has often made me laugh out loud. According to her, "books by women are treated as though they themselves were women, and criticism embarks, at its happiest, upon an intellectual measuring of bust and hips," 14 almost as though "women wrote with breasts instead of pens."15 And, of course, "there must always be two literatures like two public toilets, one for Men and one for Women." 16

Ellmann suggests that men's books could be discussed in similar terms and parodies the first paragraph of a review of Françoise Sagan's la Chamade in which Stanley Kauffmann writes: "Poor old Françoise Sagan. Just one more old-fashioned old-timer, bypassed in the rush for the latest literary vogue and for youth. Superficially, her career in America resembles the lifespan of those medieval beauties who flowered at 14, were deflowered at 15, were old at 30 and crones at 40."17 Ellmann submits: "Poor old François Sagan .. . . Superficially, his career in America resembles the life-span of those medieval troubadours who masturbated at 14, copulated at 15, were impotent at 30 and prostate cases at 40." 18

However, Ellmann herself says no to this "emulative project"19 which"would be diverting for a book season or two if it were possible to convince conventional journals to print"20 such amusing exercices de style. One could try them out in composition classes, of course, but who, really, wants to imitate what is distasteful? And gallows humour suggests, after all, that one is about to be executed which, as far as woman's fate is concerned, is no longer quite true.

There is quite definitely a destructive element in feminist criticism. Many a teacher of literature has been fearful to accept Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex, or Kate Millett's Sexual Politics because of their criticism of D. H. Lawrence, fearful maybe even to read their analyses, as they would endanger their views of a much cherished writer. I myself explored the reasons for this fear in an essay on feminist criticism included in Mother was not a person.21 It is never easy to introduce fundamental changes into one's Weltanschauung. Events in political or private life may lead or force one to accept such changes, but there is a scarcity of people who will accept them voluntarily or who will actively search for possibilities of change. Consequently, it is not easy to become a feminist. It is even frightening, for the understanding of the feminist cause means changes in all domains of life, political and private.

Indeed it is sometimes quite painful to be a feminist. When I could not see Hamlet anymore without giving much of my attention to Ophelia and to the cavalier way in which she is treated by both her father and her lover; when I became annoyed with myself for still humming the German folksong (written by Goethe), "Sah ein Knab' ein Röslein steh'n," which tells the story of a beautiful but helpless maiden who cannot defend herself successfully against the male aggressor; when Camus suddenly was no longer flawless in my eyes because of his failure to see woman other than in her relationship to man, I had to realize that something quite grave had happened.

It became evident that a new way of thinking had invaded me totally. So far, I had objected to certain attitudes of relatives, colleagues, friends, foes; I had seen discrimination and sexism in education, law, customs, public life, advertising. But now, I was beginning to discover it also in works of art that I used to cherish. The critic in me was taking into account a new dimension --my feminine consciousness--and the 'musée imaginaire,' which used to be my ultimate refuge, was not safe anymore, was in need of renovation, as everything it housed became subject to my feminist critique.

In a way, of course, this painful process led to a rejuvenation of my mind, my eyes, ears, of my feelings. It led to the discovery of new friends, in my everyday reality as well as in what goes beyond it. This then is the constructive side of feminist criticism.

Let me give you an example: I had always been somewhat reluctant to read with any serious interest the works of Colette. (Both for my M.A. and my Ph.D. theses, I attacked such literary (male) giants as Proust and Claudel.) Somehow, in my snobbism, I did not like the titles of Colette's novels -- Gigi, Claudine..., Chéri, etc. I had thought of their author as a facile and therefore popular woman novelist. Recently, Colette became one of the writers I have newly discovered for myself.

Henri Peyre speaks in his excellent study, French Novelists of Today, of the "striking flowering of French feminine fiction."22 I am wondering whether the use of the word 'flowering' is not again an example of 'phallic criticism.' Women are flowers to so many men, the metaphor of the rose has been used over and over again (Goethe, Thackeray, Saint-Exupéry, just to name three offenders). Sematology must also become one of the tools of feminism: I question the word flowering in this context. Peyre adds that "easily half of the talents in French fiction and short story, since 1930 or so, have been women."23 However, only one of the twelve

chapters of Peyre's book deals with the writings of women, altogether no more than forty pages. Fourteen of these pages furthermore deal with Simone de Beauvoir only, which does not leave much space for other authors. We must conclude that Peyre needs only 15 pages to deal with "half of the talents" since 1930, the female half, and that the male half of talents is dealt with much more fairly. I used to admire Henri Peyre for his work; I still do, but it is an admiration mixed with disillusion and regret.

Undoubtedly, some will reject the idea of consciousness-raising in the field of literary criticism and will belittle the idea, as the feminist cause is belittled in so many fields. Of course, impartial and dispassionate criticism is what we all have stood for in the past. But let us not forget that much of the impartial criticism has often been passionately biased. We have accepted critics of pronounced religious (Pierre-Henri Simon) or political (George Lucàcs) convictions. Why not accept a feminist outlook which will contribute to the elucidation of other aspects of literary works?

I certainly do not want to read women writers only, nor do I want to limit my enjoyment of the visual arts to the works of women artists only. Nevertheless, a compensatory program of study and reflection seems in order. A woman discovers herself more easily in the company and with the help of other women. It is not only helpful but also necessary for me to become acquainted with what I have ignored for so long. I must become more familiar with the female artist and the female thinker before I can try to build for myself a new imaginary museum in which both men and women will hold their place. What I am proposing is an enrichment and not an impoverishment of knowledge.

Quite often there is a slightly 'personal touch' apparent in writings by women critics or teachers of literature and this has puzzled me. Florence Howe, for instance, frequently refers to her Jewish background.24 But she herself explains why this must be so, as she believes that "the connections between feminism and literature are deep and abiding"25 and begin "in our consciousness about our lives."26 In her presidential address delivered at the 88th Annual Convention of the MLA, in Chicago, on December 27, 1973, Howe reflects on the connection between literature and life. "Literature," she says, "in its most ancient and in its most modern forms, illuminates lives, teaches us what is possible, how to cope and aspire."27 If we can agree to accept her hypothesis that the teacher of literature touches "directly the lives of people in the process of growing up, of deciding how to live, what work to seek, and with what purpose;" 28 if we

can furthermore agree to see the teaching and the criticism of literature as having some similitude, then we can, perhaps, conceive of a slightly personalized criticism as a respectable activity.

Adrienne Rich has defined what the new feminist approach means to the literary critic: "Re-vision," she calls it, "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction--is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival."29

The term survival is well known to the Canadian reader, as Margaret Atwood has published a thematic guide to Canadian literature under the same title. Atwood, whose works can be called feminist, does, as a critic, not distinguish between writings of women and writings of men. Survival 30 is about Canadian literature. Speaking of Canadians and their literature, Atwood says:

> What a lost person needs is a map of the territory, with his own position marked on it so he can see where he is in relation to everything else. Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind. Our literature is one such map, if we can learn to read it as our literature, as the product of who and where we have been. We need such a map desperately, we need to know about here, because here is where we live. For the members of a country or of a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive. 31

Speaking of women and of the significance of the discovery of "their" literature we could re-write the paragraph without much difficulty:

> What a lost woman needs is a map of the territory, with her own position marked on it, so she can see where she is in relation to everything else. Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, if we can learn to read it as our literature, as the product of who and where we have been. We need such a map desperately, we need to know about here, because here is where we live. For the members of a sex or a culture, shared knowledge of their place, their here, is not a luxury but a necessity. Without that knowledge we will not survive.

Black Studies, Canadian Studies, Women's Studies have much in common.

That Atwood has done away with the 'feminine mystique' becomes evident in her analysis of women and children in Canadian fiction. A comparison of Chapter X, "Ice Women vs Earth Mothers,"

of Survival with chapter V of Elisabeth Waterston's Survey 32 of Canadian literature, reveals a considerable difference in style and terminology. Where Waterston, who does not go as far as Atwood, speaks of 'ladies'--a term that she uses with respectful irony--Atwood uses the word 'women.' It also takes a good deal of freedom for a woman to be able to speak of a "Baby Ex Machina," 33 the "Great Canadian Baby," 34 as well as of "nonentity mothers." 35 Waterston, whose French Canadian counterpart would be Suzanne Paradis with "Femme fictive-- Femme réelle," 36 is, however, also quite aware of the impact of the women's movement on the writings of Canadian women writers. At the end of chapter V, she hints at the possibility that "the portrait of the Canadian woman as a young, free, passionate person"37 may emerge from the writings of those that belong to "the new world of Women's Liberation."38 We notice that at the moment of the publication of Waterston's Survey, Atwood's novel The Edible Woman, which so clearly analyses the lack of a female identity, was still in print and Margaret Laurence was still writing The Diviners, two books that are steps towards that portrait.

Feminist critics do not necessarily agree at all times. In "The Image of Women in Contemporary Literature," Diana Trilling39 states that the world which we see in contemporary writings shows us an individual "not only isolated from society, (but) . . . isolated from everyone . . . even his (or her) own love partner . . . .And it is especially in the relationship between lovers that emotional isolation is the order of our literary day."40 Speaking of The Naked and the Dead, Trilling sees Mailer as identifying "The destructive female force with the destructive social force: woman is society in all its dark, unspecifiable lust and horror."41 Trilling believes the woman writer "is constrained to conspire in man's view of the world"42 as "the way men write is apparently the superior and more prestigeful way to write,"43 although she adds that "a case could be made . . . for the thesis that the commitment to the self was, in fact, contributed to contemporary fiction by the woman writer."44

In short, Trilling believes that men and women writers are showing us a world in which "the gap in the emotional connection between men and women widens--desperately widens,"45 and, according to her, both feminism and technology have contributed to this phenomenon:

> The woman in advanced present-day fiction, in short, is no longer recognizedly related to the "ball and chain" of American folklore, a goddess knocked off the pedestal of romantic courtship to become that most dismal of folk figures, a wife, who saddles her poor husband with a home whose mortgage he

> cannot meet, with children who squabble and brawl, with a furnace to stoke and a lawn to mow. Feminism and technology have transformed the harassed shrew of a few decades ago to someone who is man's equal, even his superior, in the ability to meet the requirements of daily living, and woman becomes something far more insidious than a mere scold; she becomes that force in life which not only has its own unconquerable and even indefinable power but also operates to rob man of his last shred of purpose and dignity. Sexually, she is all hunger and depredation. In terms other than those of sexual desire she is an empty shell, as empty and meaningless as the society in which we find her and with which she has come to be so disastrously identified.46

Mary Ellmann also refers to the alienation complex of a great many writers. She comments on "the habitual identification of this complex and all-encompassing enmity with the relatively narrow circumstance of sexuality."47 But to her, woman is the victim of this development for which Ellmann, unlike Trilling, does not blame feminism. According to Ellmann, the male writer has made "the capacity to write, even as it is held more precariously, . . . synonymous with sexual capacity, whereupon the woman becomes the enemy of both."48

For both critics we can say what we said about Mme de Staël: unlike many male critics, they look at women in fiction with objectivity and great interest. It is the work of such critics which will help to bring about the disappearance of 'two literatures like two public toilets, one for Men and one for Women.'

It is my belief that feminist critique is zeitbedingt. It is helping women to recognize themselves, to find their position on a territory which used to be exclusively male, to surface, to survive. It is helping men to do away with 'phallic criticism.'49 Women critics now tend to counter 'phallic criticism' with a criticism marked by woman's pride in her sex. In her foreword to The School of Feminity, Margaret Lawrence defines her book as following a definite pattern of thought, namely "that women for the first time in history upon a large scale are saying their particular say about themselves, about men, and about life as it treats them separately and together with men."50 It is high time for literary criticism to take this phenomenon into account.

I do not propose that there be two distinct branches of criticism, one by, for and on men, the other by, for and on women. But we, both men and women, must stop treating books by women 'as though they themselves were women.' 'Phallic criticism' has

served and is still serving to perpetuate the myth of the artistic (and other) inferiority of women; consequently, 'vulvate criticism' seems, at the present time, justified as a weapon to combat this myth.

If Walpole could permit himself to call Mary Woolstonecraft a "hyena in petticoats,"[51] if Southey could call Charlotte Brontë "a day-dreamer,"[52] and if R. W. Chambers could write that "poor Margery Kempe is to be classed with those hotels that Baedeker describes as "variously judged,"[53] then it is perfectly legitimate that Mary Ellmann should call Robert Frost a "camping type"[54] and that Kate Millett should refer to Norman Mailer as to a "would-be-Irish-buffon."[55] As long as the words feminine and woman writer are used as pejorative qualifications such combat is as necessary as any querelle des anciens et des modernes. Feminism and feminist critique will not simply 'go away,' the 'fad,' as many hopefully call feminism, will not fade out. Les anciens et les modernes will have to arrive at an understanding, in order to allow the streams of male and female consciousness to converge into a river of simply human, heterosexual consciousness.

FOOTNOTES

1. From Ode au Dieu d'Amour; my translation.
2. Ibid.
3. My translation.
4. My translation.
5. In Joan Goulianos (ed.), By a Woman Writt (Baltimore, 1974), p. 25.
6. Ibid., p. 24.
7. Ibid., pp. 71-74.
8. Mme de Staël on Politics, Literature, and National Character, translated, edited and with an introduction by Morroe Berger (New York, 1964), p. 158.
9. Ibid., p. 198.
10. Ibid., p. 235.
11. Ibid.
12. Virginia Woolf, The Common Reader, First Series (London, 1957), p. 161.
13. Leonard Woolf (ed.), A Writer's Diary, being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf (London, 1959), p. 148.
14. Mary Ellmann, Thinking about Women (New York, 1968), p. 29.
15. Ibid., p. 35.
16. Ibid., p. 30.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. M. Andersen, "Feminist Criticism," in Mother was not a person, writings by Montreal women, compiled by M. Andersen (Montreal, 1972), pp. 88-89.
22. Henri Peyre, French Novelists of Today (New York, 1967), p. 292.
23. Ibid.
24. Cf. "Feminism and Literature," in Susan Koppelman Cornillon (ed.), Images of Women in Fiction (Bowling Green, 1972), pp. 253-277.
25. Ibid., p. 253.
26. Ibid.
27. "Literacy and Literature," Presidential Address delivered at the 88th Annual Convention of the MLA, Chicago, December 1973; reprinted in PMLA, Vol. 89, No. 3 (May 1974), p. 433.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., p. 440.
30. Margaret Atwood, Survival (Toronto, 1972).
31. Ibid., pp. 18-19.
32. Elisabeth Waterston, Survey (Toronto, 1973).
33. Atwood, Survival, p. 207.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Suzanne Paradis, Femme fictive--Femme réelle (Quebec, 1966).
37. Waterston, Survey, p. 74.
38. Ibid.
39. Robert Jay Lifton (ed.), in The Woman in America, pp. 52-71.
40. Ibid., p. 61.
41. Ibid., p. 63.
42. Ibid., p. 65.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., p. 66.
45. Ibid., p. 67.
46. Ibid., p. 63.
47. Ellmann, Thinking about Women, p. 46.
48. Ibid., p. 47.
49. Cf. M. Andersen, Mother was not a person, p. 49.
50. Margaret Lawrence, The School of Femininity (Toronto, 1936).
51. Quoted from Goulianos, By a Woman Writt, p. xv.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. Ellmann, Thinking about Women, p. 14.
55. Sexual Politics (New York, 1971), p. 325.