

stantial arguments designed, it seems, to alienate even the most impartial.

He takes heart from the fact that "feminist criticism is heavily dependent on men to articulate its position" (p. 11). Those who, out of resentment at this unpalatable truth, would denigrate the contribution of John Stuart Mill (for example), constitute a "cynical warning to any man who tries his hand at feminist criticism: if you have to do it, make sure you don't do it better than women" (p. 12). Himself undeterred, Ruthven points out that, as a potential contribution to knowledge, feminist criticism must be prepared to entertain and profit from the reasoned objections of professional scholars—and this in spite of the disposition of many feminist to react to this challenge as though it were "a threat to an immutable truth" (p. 14). Men are as well qualified as women to administer the acid test since, "it is no more necessary to be a woman in order to analyse feminist criticism as criticism than it is to be a Marxist in order to understand the strategies of Marxist criticism" (p. 15). Stripped of bravado, what this amounts to is simply a proposal to evaluate feminist literary studies objectively, as it were, from the supposedly neutral territory of the academy.

Though perhaps naive, this would not be truly objectionable had Ruthven made a more convincing show of scholarly impartiality. The burden of his complaint against feminist criticism is that "it constitutes itself as a faith to be fortified rather than a truth-claim to be investigated" (p. 13). To ask of feminist criticism, "Is it true?" is surely already to make a special case of the object of inquiry, to demand of it what no theory of literature is equipped to provide. Though the rallying cries of the various schools may sometimes be couched as truth-claims—"a poem should not mean but be," "the Author is dead," "there is nothing outside the text"—it is difficult to see how any of them could be judged on the basis of truthfulness. What would the standard be? What would constitute proof? Literary theories, by and large, cannot help but appear to outsiders as matters of faith; it is only at the level of their interpretation of specific texts that their claims are ever open to the sort of empirical investigation that Ruthven appears to have in mind.

Yet, it is in his discussion of textual interpretation, potentially the most fruitful area for rigorous debate, that his case appears weakest. Having noted the propensity of feminist criticism to privilege feminist explanations of literary date over others that seem equally plausible, Ruthven attempts to demonstrate the arbitrariness of images of women criticism. Feminists account for the reverential treatment of the female figure in the conven-

tional Petrarchan sonnet, for instance, by showing that it functions as an effective strategy for delineating and fixing women as the mute objects of male desire. Ruthven's reply to these critics is that the Petrarchan convention arose simply because it satisfied an artistic need, "the literary imagination is stimulated far more productively by sexual frustration than by gratified desire" (p. 78). Somehow it escapes him that this is precisely the circumstance that the feminist critics were seeking to explain. Their interpretation of the data is more satisfying here because it is more comprehensive, as well as recognizing an ostensible need to depict women in a specific way, it explores the underlying reasons for this need.

The dismissiveness and irritation evident in this book are traceable, in a curious way, to its conception of feminist literary studies as "just one more way of talking about books" (p. 8). As such, feminist criticism ought to be absorbed as quickly as possible into what Ruthven envisages as the diverse but harmonious company of all academic critical practices. Failing to appreciate the reasons why feminists should find such a prospect undesirable, he can only express his dismay at the many issues on which feminism pits itself deliberately against the combined forces of traditional criticism. The days have long since gone by when various critical approaches could coexist under the comfortable illusion that they were supplementing and enriching one another. Whether one approves or laments this fact, Ruthven's book is evidence that there is little to be gained by pretending it isn't so.

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Pandora's Daughters. The Role and Status of Women in Greek and Roman Antiquity. Eva Cantarella. *Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.*

This book is a must on the reading list of any serious curriculum in Women's Studies; this English version, translated by Maureen Fant, first published in 1981 by Editori Riuniti, is long overdue. A legal historian, Eva Cantarella brings a new approach to the study of the codification of sexual roles and attitudes. Traditionally, this type of study has been based largely on the emotionally distorted evidence of mythology and literature. While not fully dismissing these sources, Cantarella focusses her study on the examination of more objective information, such as legal documents and their interpretation in the customs of the day. "In their abstraction and generality," says Cantarella, "the rules of law allow reconstruction of

the life of all the women who have passed through history without entering it." In the process, she provides the reader with a wealth of information on the lives of women of all social classes in Greek and Roman antiquity, and with some strong suggestions as to the origins of many of the attitudes which have determined gender approaches and sex roles since, and up to our own day. Undeniably an important book, it does suffer from two major weaknesses: a sometimes irritatingly obvious feminist slant, and occasional lapses in scholarship, such as inadequate references.

The English text represents a considerably expanded version, incorporating a wealth of material which has become available since the first publication of the book. A bibliographical note to this effect provides valuable, up-to-date information for the specialist. The title has been changed to eliminate any possibility of misunderstanding. Originally named *L'ambiguo malanno*—a Euripidean reference to womankind—*Pandora's Daughters* now refers to Hesiod's myth on the creation of woman. Under either heading, it is the author's contention that men have traditionally viewed women as an evil force in a universe which, but for their obnoxious presence, might be tolerably livable. The purpose of the book is to uncover the origin of these attitudes and their codification.

Although the book is divided into parallel sections, "Greece" and "Rome," the development of the material within the sections does not follow parallel lines. "Greece" emphasizes the theoretical aspects of the "woman question" and the origin of Western misogyny, while "Rome" tends to follow a more historical/chronological approach. Both sections begin with a discussion of the hypothesis of matriarchy in prehistoric times. Although unable to disprove the widely held belief in a matriarchal stage of development (such as in Minoan culture), the author tries to modify this view by distinguishing between "maternal law," "strong female presence" within a society (such as in religion and ritual), and "political power" she definitely denies the presence of any real political power at any stage, while admitting the reality of the other two factors. While the author's slant is barely perceptible in this discussion, it becomes blatant in chapter two, "The Origin of Western Misogyny," based on the image of Mycenaean womanhood as presented in Homer and Hesiod. Her hypothesis of Homer's distrust of women especially in relation to Penelope, seems farfetched, and becomes particularly suspicious in view of the fact that no mention is made of idealized figures such as Andromache, the loving young wife, Hecuba, the long-suffering mother, or Nausicaa, the hospitable young maiden. On the other hand, Cantarella demonstrates clearly and plausibly the relegation of women to second-hand citizens in the evolution of the

polis, taking Athens as a paradigmatic example (Athenian women enjoyed less political power than those of other, less democratically governed, city states, particularly Sparta). In her chapter on "Philosophers and Women" she gives a good account of the way in which the discrimination against women was given a solid theoretical foundation on biological, rather than cultural, grounds—an argument which feminists are still battling today, some two thousand years later. Extraordinary women such as Aspasia, the possible inventor of the "Socratic method," are mentioned briefly, but their achievements and emancipation are seen by the author as the exceptions that prove the rule. On the other hand, her discussion of homosexuality in general, and the role of lesbianism in creating female communities and some level of emancipation—"finishing schools" such as the one run by Sappho on Lesbos, is revealing and does demonstrate the presence of a certain amount of freedom in women's lives—not within, but outside of, male-dominated society.

When she moves from history and philosophy to literature, the author is on more shaky ground. Her contention that Euripides' work "seems best to express Greek misogyny" is certainly controversial, if not downright untenable. Few writers in the history of drama have produced a more compassionate and sympathetic image of woman and her suffering at the hands of warmongering and ambition-driven males. In fact, she herself half retracts the original statement when she points out the importance of debate in the intellectual climate of Athens at the time. The section in "Greece" concludes with a brief survey of the increasing emancipation of women in the Hellenistic period, an emancipation which failed, however, to eliminate long ingrained attitudes of misogyny.

The second portion of the book, shorter than the first, gives an historic overview of the evolution of the position of women, from the early subjugation under absolute *patria potestas* in the period of Kings, through the Republic, to the full emancipation of the late Empire. The main thesis which emerges is that of a totally different view of the role of women in Greece and Rome. Roman women were not segregated as Greek women were, they enjoyed considerably greater freedoms in the everyday conduct of their lives, and, most important, they were not considered simple instruments of reproduction, but also played an essential role in the transmission of culture by personally bringing up their children. Growing emancipation brought with it growing licentiousness, at least in the view of the Roman male. Again, Cantarella deals with this difficult problem in a way which is not altogether objective, taking her examples of male invective against women from the satirists, Marial and Juvenal, whose job it was

indeed (the author's denial notwithstanding) to be "malevolent." Further evidence of licentious behaviour is provided by documentation of a widespread outcry on the part of both statesmen and philosophers against the all-too-common practice of abortion.

Cantarella concludes her discussion of the status of women in ancient Rome on a provocative note: she suggests the occurrence of a reversal from emancipation to subordination under the influence of two powerful religious cults, first, the worship of Isis, and second the growth of Christianity. She sees woman in classical times as enjoying greater freedom than woman under Christianity, and concludes her book with the thought-provoking suggestion that the process of emancipation may be reversible.

An index and voluminous notes complete the book. Although the translator mentions that the notes have been especially adapted to English readers, they still contain a large percentage of references in other languages, especially Italian and French. Nevertheless, the notes constitute a most valuable bibliography to any reader, and a source of delight to the multilingual scholar or comparatist.

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Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (+203) to Marguerite Porete (+1310). Peter Dronke. *Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, Pp. 338/xi.*

This is a good book. It is also an important one, for in it Dronke gives us sensitive critical readings of women's writings that have been overlooked, misread, or explained away in earlier criticism: overlooked because they did not fit into the predominant (and predominantly masculine) traditions of thought and literature of their era, misread when they were interpreted by the wrong conventions, explained away as really written by a man after all. There is no argument being made here for a tradition of women's writing. None of the writers Dronke examines at length draws upon any of the others, for the circulation of their works was limited, and, indeed, they are strikingly different in the kinds of writing they do and in their styles. In fact, if there is a single text that recurs as an influence on several of these writers, it is one written by a man, Ovid's *Heriodes*—the one well-known classical text which shows us women writing and depicting their own lot. (Constance of Le Ronceray, Queen Radegunde, perhaps the

Countess of Dia, and certainly Heloise all show the influence of the *Heriodes* as a model). While some of these women display knowledge of classical and patristic works, like the above-named and Hrotsvitha with her use of Terence's comedies, other women who are altogether illiterate are represented by transcriptions of their testimony before ecclesiastical courts inquiring into the activities of the Cathar sect in Provence. Dronke has

focused on texts that have, in diverse ways, a notable autobiographic or literary or intellectual interest—texts in which women tell how they understand themselves and their world, or construct imaginative models of their own. (p. vii)

These texts are best characterized as diverse. They are all interesting in that the writers have not fallen into the Wife of Bath's error: recognizing that the hunter's depiction of a lion may differ from the lion's depiction of himself, but then painting herself as lion through the hunter's eyes anyway. Yet, there is no single "view of women" being presented here. For example, Perpetua's description of her imprisonment and her visions is remarkable for its individuality: "Perpetua concentrated unswervingly on what was unique in her experience; she did not try to make her experience exemplary" (p. 17). Here are the thoughts of a twenty-two year old Christian catechumen approaching martyrdom, and burdened with a good daughter's concern for an aged father who is furious and incomprehending of her stubbornness and with a mother's feelings for her infant still at the breast. Only slightly less remarkable than Perpetua's own record of herself is Dronke's analysis of her visions, an analysis that is subtle and convincing, and avoids the trap of conventional Christian allegorizing. Equally admirably, his account of Dhuoda's manual of advice for her sixteen year old son makes us see the poignancy of the situation in which she was writing: her warlike husband, Bernard, had sent her to live in Uzès; the boy for whom she wrote the manual had been sent by his father as a political hostage to guarantee peace with Charles the Bald; an infant son had just been taken out of her custody by his father. The knowledge of her situation illuminates the personal strengths and political weaknesses out of which she writes, and charges with extra meaning her injunctions to her son to be loyal both to his emperor and his father. Dronke also writes of Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim, Heloise, Hildegarde of Bingen, and Marguerite Porete, as well as a number of women whose works or records are treated in less detail—remarkable women all, and as dissimilar one from the other as Aquinas is from Francis of Assisi, or Chaucer from Langland. Most problematic of these figures is Hildegard, who comes across despite Dronke's obvious admiration as neurotic