EN 122 MODES OF READING

PRESENTATION

**Hélène CIXOUS**

Introduction:

What is feminism in literature? Feminist writings exist since the 18th century with Mary Wollstonecraft: *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.* Yet, feminist literary criticism is more recent. It started in the late 1960s with the growth of the women’s liberation movement. Feminist criticism incorporated recent critical theories such as poststructuralism, Marxism, psychoalanytical theory and postmodernism.

There are two main approaches: feminist criticism seen as discussing works of the Cannon of all kinds from a feminist perspective (male and female writers) and feminist criticism seen as studying women.

In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist criticism reflected on the goals of the women’s liberation movement. They focused on the representation of women in literature, especially on stereotypes. Josephine Donovan, one of the main figures of feminist criticism, argued that women in literature are often represented as others, not self, objects of the gaze but rarely the center of consciousness. Women are stereotyped in the Cannon. Her best-known essay is *Beyond the Net: Feminist Criticism as moral Criticism.* Donovan explained that the Western Cannon is full of stereotypes based on the Mary/ Eve opposition: Eve as the evil temptress and Mary as the Mother of God. Mary is the good woman who helps men and Eve is the bad woman who opposes the male.

Example: in Homer’s *Odyssey:* the good wife = Penelope ≠ the evil temptress = seductive siren Circe.

Those simplistic clichés deprived female characters of subjectivity.

Psychoanalytical feminist criticism:

Many critics are influenced by Freud and Lacan’s theory of the subject (subject is created through language) = inspiration in Simone de Beauvoir “one is not born a woman but rather becomes one”. The qualities (gentleness, submissiveness, modesty) presented as naturally feminine are in fact learnt, acquired rather than inherited. They are the product of education and indoctrination. For psychoanalytical feminism, femininity is constructed, not natural.

Postmodern Feminist Criticism:

For feminism, postmodern approaches involve deconstructing the traditional set of oppositions associated with the male and female pair. The idea is to show that literature reflects the set of oppositions: Male Female

Strong weak

Culture nature

Knowledge feeling

Norm other

Subject object

Deconstruction consists in showing that those oppositions could be reversed. There are contradictions. For example, some of the typical stereotypes about woman are that they are strange and predictable. But these are contradictory stereotypes: something predictable is something normal, but not strange = deconstructive approach.

**Hélène Cixous in Lodge (358-365):**

* Hélène Cixous was born in Algeria and was a teacher at the University of Paris. Her studies are located along post-structuralist lines. She writes plays and novels but also translated one of the major study of James Joyce. The extract we have in Lodge is “Sorties” which exemplifies her strong feminism. She herself has rejected the label of “feminist” seeing it as something which perpetuates the opposition male/female. Yet, her style is very much linked to that of feminist writers.
* Hélène Cixous’s writings are part of what we can call the “postmodern feminism”. In this group, we can also find Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. These writers are influenced by Lacan and are interested in women’s writings that they called “feminine writing”. They saw it as a language that escapes the dualistic pattern of the dominant/ patriarchal forms of writing. There is a difference between “écriture feminine” and “écriture masculine”. “Feminine writing” is not necessarily being written by women but written with certain characteristics associated with the mother rather than the father. “Ecriture feminine” is described as “the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text”.
* Cixous is mainly influenced by Lacan’s revisionist reading of Freud and by Derrida. For Cixous and Kristeva, feminine writing derives from the mother and originates in the pre-linguistic stage before the child enters the symbolic stage of language (Lacan). Feminine language refuses fixed meaning. In this system, the speaking subjects disappear instead you have a free interplay of voices, of signifiers. The “”I’ is not associated with a fixed identity.
* The extract starts with a set of stereotypical oppositions between man and woman (Lodge 359):

Activity / passivity

Sun/ Moon

Culture/Nature

Day/ Night

Father / Mother

Head / Heart

Intelligible / Sensitive

Logos / Pathos

Man/ Woman.

* In those examples, Cixous stresses how literature, philosophy, criticism, speaking, writing are all based on a set of oppositions, “Thought has always worked by opposition” (359) – Link with De Saussure and signifiers and signified, we understand a word because of its opposition to something else. The thought seems to be organized through “dual oppositions”. All the traditional oppositions are linked to the opposition man/woman. Those sets of opposition always involve a question of power and thus of war. In the opposition male/female, the male is the privileged being, the one in power but to be in power, he needs the woman, because without the woman, his power has no meaning because it cannot be used on somebody and it can only be perceived because the woman exists. The man has always been linked to the idea of will, authority, power. The woman is the passive subject. The father acts alone. The woman sometimes doesn’t even exist. She is out of the oppositions or coupled with the son. The mother may not exist, yet she has to be there so that the father’s will can be seen. In literature, it all refers to the man. For the man to be in power, he needs the woman to be subordinate to his order. There is an idea of “burial” of the woman, death of the woman. This opposition is something on which all societies had developed themselves. They have been perpetuated so that no other system could develop. But what if this system of logocentrism has not existed? Cixous is writing at a time when she says that “the dead” awake, when women start to undermine those traditional set of oppositions.
* What does one give? The economy itself has produced these differences by creating “signs, relationships of power, relationships of production and of reproduction”. Who is giving and who is receiving? Freud and Jones saw a “natural”, a biological sexual difference. For Freud, the feminine situation is linked to her biological weakness compared to man. The first person that human beings love is the mother but this love is “natural” for men. For Freud, femininity is not an essence, it is a biological difference. There is only a masculine essence that the girl experiences when she is young.
* For Jones: “Femininity is an autonomous essence”: The girl experiences desire for the father and the desire to be a mother thanks to the father. But she has also a primary love for the mother. For Jones, femininity is different than masculinity while for Freud, femininity was in part a masculine essence. In this theory, the woman is also bound to die. Sexual difference for Freud is linked to anatomy, to the outside, to the “voyeur”.
* But for Cixous, the difference lies in the sexual pleasure. Difficulty for a woman to experience sexual pleasure as she has never been asked “what she wants”. She has never questioned her will because nobody does it. Phallocentrism: means centered on men or from a male point of view. History, indeed, has been, only defined in terms of masculinity. There are no records for femininity except those done by men, so it is still phallocentrism. For Cixous, here comes the time to change history, to redefine it. We have to get rid of the ideas of “essence”, “nature” and “destiny”. Such things do not exist. Phallocentrism has come into being because of history and culture. It has taken roots in everything so that it became difficult to imagine that another system could exist. We cannot determine what will become of sexual difference because these differences are trapped in history and very much linked to culture. “Man” and “woman” through history, have come to be associated to multiple representations that we have difficulty to get rid of. Conceptualization of man and woman change and are transformed through images, myths, identifications. To think of a new idea of femininity and masculinity, there is a need to restructure the whole society, politics and economy, to have a real liberation of sexuality, to let femininity and masculinity be what they want, without being pre-conditioned by history or culture. This would automatically generate new set of differences. Yet, the old Order is still very much present today.
* The masculine Future: there are exceptions. Some people try to challenge those traditional oppositions. Cixous does not say that to create yourself you need to be homosexual but you need to accept the complexity and mobility of the other sex. There must be “an abundance of the other, of the diverse”. The “I” shall not be a fixed person, but multiple identities, masculine and feminine. She advocates a mingling of men, women, femininity, masculinity in order to “recompose ourselves in other bodies”.
* Cixous’analysis in link to *The Magic Toyshop*: One of the first ways we can see some links with Cixous is through the clear opposition between man and woman in the book. Uncle Philip represents the typical patriarch. He is the superior being in the house. His power can only be seen because of Aunt Margaret. The day she marries him, she lost her voice, which could symbolize the death of the woman who vanishes when she is with the man. Yet, at the end, when the house which clearly symbolizes patriarchy and the old Order is destroyed, she finds her voice back, as if by killing the patriarch, the woman comes back from the dead. We can also notice that Melanie experiences the idea of the shifting “I”. She became Leda when she performed the play “she felt herself not herself, wrenched from her own personality, watching this whole fantasy from another place” (166). She became Jonathon in one of her dreams: “she dreamed she was Jonathon. She had been so uncertain of herself all day that it was almost a relief to find she was, in fact, Jonathon…Melanie found herself superimposed upon him, the two shapes stealing downstairs on the same feet; and part of these Siamese twins started as they passed all the closed doors” (174-175).