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MODERN STUDIES OF LITERATURE

THE FEMININE TRADITION IN ENGLISH FICTION

O.M. SMOCHIN

Abstract. This article on feminine tradition and linguistic approaches to gender in literature demonstrates the utility for students of gender in society at large to investigate the uses to which gender may be put in the carefully planned discourse of fiction. It reveals not what native speakers naturally do, but what they are able to understand and the inventions and models that influence their understanding.

Keywords: women's writing, feminine genre, male writer, evolution of themes and characters, linguistic approach to gender, "women's tradition".

One man in two is a woman.

1. INTRODUCTION

Women's writing as a discrete area of *literary studies* is based on the notion that the experience of women, historically, has been shaped by their gender, and so women writers by definition are a group worthy of separate study. "Their texts emerge from and intervene in conditions usually very different from those which produced most writing by men." [1, p. 46]. It is not a question of the subject matter or political stance of a particular author, but of her *gender*: her position as a woman within the literary marketplace. Women's writing, as a discrete area of literary studies and practice, is recognized explicitly by the numbers of dedicated journals, *organizations*, *awards*, and *conferences* which focus mainly or exclusively on texts produced by women. The majority of English literature programmes offer courses on specific aspects of literature by women, and women's writing is generally considered an area of specialization in its own right.

The idea of discussing women's cultural contributions as a separate category has a long history. Lists of *exemplary* women can be found as far back as the 8th century BC, when *Hesiod* compiled a list of heroines and goddesses. *Plutarch* listed heroic and artistic women in his *Moralia*. British writers, as in so many other instances, embraced the *classical models* and made them their own. Women wrote sentimental poetry and comedies but they struck their most and frequent and forceful notes in fiction.

From the very beginning of the novel in England W. Scott considered that "it would be impossible to match against the names of d'Arblay, Edgeworth, Miss Austen, Radcliffe, etc. the same number of masculine competitors" and decades later George Eliot could claim that "a cluster of great names, both

living and dead, rush to our memories, in evidence that women can produce novels not only fine, but among the very finest" [1, p. 73].

Through all these years, not only had women written hundreds of novels, but they had, from the start, provided a large percentage of the readers. Eighteenth century English critics asserted that "works of this kind" were "chiefly calculated for the use and amusement of the ladies". There will be little change through the whole period in spite of occasional moral objections.

Can the novel be, by nature, a feminine genre? Obviously not, because in the first sixty years of its existence, most of the research and progress have been achieved by men. Later the influence of male novelists and of male writers soars above discussion: there was undoubtedly a constant interaction between men's and women's works.

Why should we deal with women's works as branch apart in literature?

During more than a century women novelists held to a certain number of situations and themes, while several of them acknowledged their debts to their female predecessors. Moreover, a few possible interpretations will be suggested: recourse will occasionally be had to sociology and psychology.

The analysis of the features characteristic of the initiators were still recognizable in the works of those women who held the attention and even the admiration of generations of readers not only from 1800 but to 1860 but even to the present day. Considered in the light of the history of a genre, the originality of each author tends to be minimized. The intention is not only to stress each writer's debt to her predecessors but also to insist on the evolution of themes and characters.

Such great novelists as J. Austen, Mrs. Gaskell, Charlotte and Emily Bronte, George Eliot belong to the long tradition of women-writers. W. Scott wondered whether the fascination women had for the novel arose "of mere chance, or "whether the less marked and more evanescent shades of modern society are more happily painted by the finer pencil of a woman; or whether our modern delicacy..." [2, p. 185].

2. LINGUISTIC APPROACHES TO GENDER IN LITERARY TEXTS

The question of gender in literary texts has been approached by linguists in three different ways.

The **first** involves a comparison of the fiction created by male and female authors and is typified by the search for «the female sentence» or a specifically female style of writing. The **second** involves a study of the purposes to which the linguistic gender system of different languages has been put in literary works. In the former, gender is seen as a cultural property of the author, in the latter, a morphological property of the text. A **third** perspective on language and gender in literary texts is provided by translators and translation theorists. Translation theorists typically view a text as expressive of a particular time and place as well as being expressed in a particular language. The differences between source and target language may be accompanied by differences in culture and period, thus translators often work with both morphological gender and cultural gender. *Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own* (1929) exemplifies the impulse in the modern period to explore a tradition of women's writing. Woolf, however, sought to explain what she perceived as an absence; by the mid-century scholarly attention turned to finding and reclaiming "lost" writers [3, p. 23]. And there were many to reclaim: it is common for the editors of dictionaries or anthologies of women's writing to refer to the difficulty in choosing from all the available material [4, p. 56]. In a study on the micro-level of text-making (looking at the immediate linguistic environment rather than the whole novel), Susan Ehrlich (1990) has analyzed the use of reported speech and thought in canonical texts, particularly the novels of Virginia Woolf. She compares Woolf's style with that of Henry James and Ernest Hemingway with regard to the types of cohesive devices each uses. James depends heavily on what is known as grammatical cohesion, or anaphora. This means he introduces a character, and as soon as the reader has had the chance to form a mental image of this character, he replaces the character's name with a pronoun (this is, of course, a very traditional strategy). Hemingway relies instead on lexical cohesion, or a simple repetition of the character's name. Woolf, in contrast, uses a much greater variety of

cohesive devices including grammatical and lexical cohesion as well as semantic connectors, temporal linking, and progressive aspect. A semantic connector tells the reader explicitly to connect two pieces of information in a particular way: *at the same time; in this way; in addition*. Temporal linking gives two clauses the same time reference and is a feature that often involves hypothetical clauses which have no time reference of their own: *Edith would be sure to know; I would have arrived before the others*. Progressive aspect also links two propositions where one clause provides an anchor for the other. The advantage of the research like this is that it provides a concrete set of criteria by which to distinguish different literary styles. We cannot assume that all women will write like Woolf and all men like James or Hemingway, but if we know that a researcher has based his or her claims entirely on a study of canonical texts by male authors, we can predict that certain types of data will be missing. Women's writing came to exist as a separate category of scholarly interest relatively recently. In the West, the *second wave of feminism* prompted a general reevaluation of women's historical contributions, and various academic sub-disciplines, such as *women's history* and *women's writing*, developed in response to the belief that women's lives and contributions have been underrepresented as areas of scholarly interest. Virginia Blain characterized the growth in interest since 1970 in women's writing as "powerful" [5, p. 147]. Much of this early period of feminist literary scholarship was given over to the rediscovery and reclamation of texts written by women. The widespread interest in women's writing developed alongside, influenced, and was influenced by, a general reassessment and expansion of the *literary canon*. The question of whether or not there is a "women's tradition" remains vexed; some scholars and editors refer to a "women's canon" and women's "literary lineage," and seek to "identify the recurring themes and to trace the evolutionary and interconnecting patterns" in women's writing [5, p. 67], but the range of women's writing across time and place is so considerable that, according to some, it is inaccurate to speak of "women's writing" in a universal sense: Claire Buck calls "women's writing" an "unstable category" [3, p. 132].

3. CONCLUSIONS

Women writers cannot be considered apart from their male contemporaries and the larger literary tradition. Using the term "women's writing" implies, then, the belief that women in some sense constitute a group, however diverse, who share a position of difference based on gender.

This article on feminine tradition and linguistic approaches to gender in literature demonstrates the utility for students of gender in society at large to investigate the uses to which gender may be put in the unspontaneous, carefully planned discourse of fiction. It reveals not what native speakers naturally do, but what they are able to understand and the inventions and models that influence their understanding.

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Address: O.M. Smochin, Ion Creanga State Pedagogical University, 1, Ion Creanga Str., Chişinău, Moldova.

E-mail: olgasmochin@yahoo.com.

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Статтю присвячено фемінінній традиції та лінгвістичним підходам до гендеру у літературі. У статті продемонстровано необхідність вивчення студентами не лише гендеру в соціумі загалом, але і його вживання у заздалегідь запланованому дискурсі художньої літератури. Його прояви є не тим, що мовці роблять природнім шляхом, а тим, що вони спроможні зрозуміти та конструкціями і моделями, які впливають на їх розуміння.

Ключові слова: жіноче письмо, фемінінний жанр, письменник-чоловік, еволюція тем і образів, лінгвістичний підхід до гендеру, «жіноча традиція».