

CHAPTER 8

Gendering the Text

Feminist Criticism, Postfeminism, and Queer Theory

I am already performing a feminine critical act, namely refusing to speak from a position of supposed neutrality and pseudoscientific objectivity.

—Naomi Schor

My daughter, age five, trips and falls on the driveway, skinning her knees. I'm there quickly, patting her on the back, saying, "Let's go inside and get that fixed up." My daughter looks up at me, tears flowing, and says in amazed disgust, "What can you do? You're just a literature doctor! I want mom, the real doctor!"

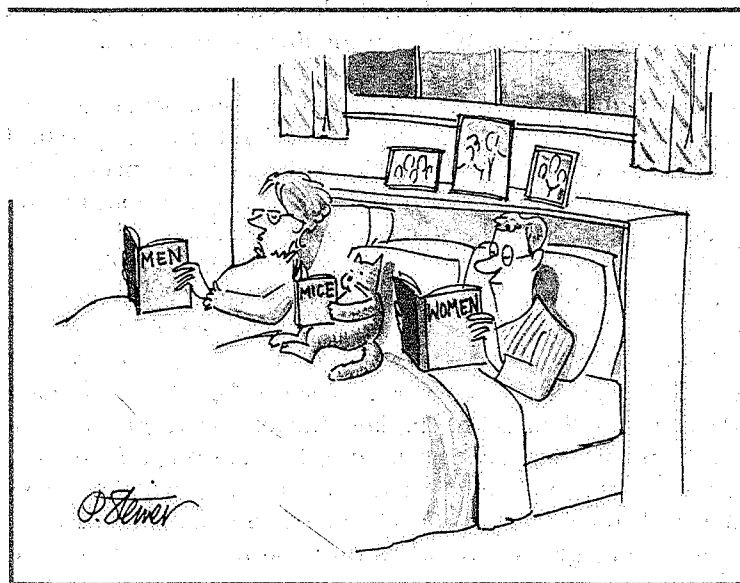
What indeed can literature doctors—and their students—do? What does literature itself do, for that matter? Is there any practical value in doing literary criticism? With all the skinned knees in the world, not to mention hunger, disease, poverty, oppression, racism, sexism, child abuse, isn't the study of poetry, fiction, and drama a huge self-indulgence? Don't we have much better things to do?

To be sure, nothing I could say, however insightful, would disinfect and bandage my daughter's knee (although she did laugh as I recited Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" while she was getting cleaned up). We say "The pen is mightier than the sword," but I'd rather have a sword sometimes. Still, as Christopher Hitchens puts it in his recent book on the political impact of literature, *Unacknowledged Legislation*, "there are things that pens can do, and swords cannot" (xiv). Hitchens's title refers to Percy Bysshe Shelley's famous claim that "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world"; and for Hitchens, a good example of literature's legislative power is the twentieth-century

collapse of the Soviet Union's empire, the consequence in large part, especially in Eastern Europe, of "a civil opposition led by satirical playwrights, ironic essayists, Bohemian jazz players and rock musicians, and subversive poets."

Literary critics have sometimes naively imagined that their work has no political implications, as if the reading of literature and culture were somehow beyond the shaping and wielding of power and influence. Among those strategies that have been openly and avowedly political, feminist criticism has been one of the most visible and influential over the past few decades. Indeed, key figures in the struggle for women's equality have been academic scholars of literature: Germaine Greer, for instance, who published a classic bestseller in 1970, *The Female Eunuch*, wrote her doctoral dissertation on Shakespeare's early comedies; Kate Millett, whose 1969 *Sexual Politics* is another classic of the women's liberation movement, deals extensively with literature.

This chapter aims to illustrate the creative power of politically self-conscious reading by focusing on feminist criticism, postfeminism, and queer theory—with the understanding that race, ethnicity, economics, class, and many other political issues provide fertile interpretive grounds. These approaches, like politics itself, are unavoidably grounded in history, in how we interpret and make sense of what has



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happened, and what we are going to do about it. Political criticism in all its varieties is concerned with identifying and opposing the ways that a particular portion of a culture is excluded, suppressed, and exploited. Feminist criticism, like feminism itself, is concerned of course with the status of women. Jonathan Culler in fact argues that "feminist criticism" is "the name that should be applied to all criticism alert to the critical ramifications of sexual oppression, just as in politics 'women's issues' is the name now applied to many fundamental questions of personal freedom and social justice" (56). In this expansive sense, interestingly enough, the examination of masculine roles and stereotypes, men's (or masculinist) studies, would be considered a branch of feminist criticism.

Postfeminism, as you might imagine, also grows out of the feminist movement. The term has sometimes been used to describe a reactionary stance, occupied by such figures as Naomi Wolf, Camille Paglia, and Rene Denfield, who reject the idea that women today are inevitably victims oppressed by men—an assumption that they attribute to mainstream feminism. In this sense, postfeminism is akin to "antifeminism." But another way of thinking about "postfeminism" is that it refers to what comes *after* feminism, suggesting that feminism has substantially done its work, and men and women have pretty much become equals—in the most important respects, in modern cultures anyway. From this "postfeminist" perspective, the main goal of what is sometimes called "the first wave" of feminism—equality—has been achieved, at least in the sense that women have the freedom to determine their lives. They can vote, own businesses, defer childbearing, be elected to office, pursue any career they're physically and mentally capable of. Sure, prejudice against women still exists (and in many parts of the world is regnant), but it is pervasively dying out in first-world countries as quickly as its adherents can pass away (or evolve).

Postfeminism can also be seen as an extension of feminism, in the sense that post-structuralism is an extension of structuralism, or post-modernism pushes beyond modernism. If the first wave of feminism sought equality for women, then the "second wave" of feminism (it's generally agreed) focused on the distinctive needs of women. Equal opportunity is good, but if women are still primarily responsible for childrearing, housekeeping, socializing, and so forth, then equal opportunity is not really equal. Therefore, some second-wave feminists (Mary Daly, Andrea Dworkin, for instance) have argued that we should reverse the established patriarchy. Such a reversal does not lead, of course, to the end of prejudice and oppression; an elephant upside-down is still an elephant. Beyond such a reversal, postfeminism becomes the next step in feminism: a liberating deconstruction of the whole business of gender and sexuality. The historical progression

here does fit the classic structure of deconstruction: First, notice the binary relationship (men and women) and which element is privileged (the first wave); second, expose the arbitrariness of this privileging by reversing it, advocating matriarchal values (the second wave); and third, deconstruct the binary, dismantling the very oppositional structure that makes oppression and prejudice possible (postfeminism, which has sometimes been called the third wave).

What does such a deconstructive move amount to in practice? A commitment to disrupting comfortable patterns of thinking leads inevitably, it seems, to a pluralistic outlook. For instance, by rejecting the idea of women as victims, and at the same time embracing the self-determination of women, postfeminists (in this third wave incarnation anyway) might well be reluctant to condemn pornography. Whereas first and second wave feminists have typically seen pornography as a dramatic instance of the exploitation of women, a postfeminist theorist might ask what happens when women are involved in the writing, directing, and producing of pornography? If women enjoy watching pornography, are they still being exploited? (In the same way?) Or, if pornography is inherently exploitative, is there any intrinsic reason why women are exploited more gravely than men? As Ann Brooks argues in *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory, and Cultural Forms* (1997), the opposition of man versus woman is just too simple, and too unhealthy: postfeminism replaces dualism with diversity, and consensus with variety. It sets aside assumptions. One might well decide that pornography is singularly exploitative of women, or that men are equally exploited, or that no one is exploited; that pornography actually serves a useful purpose, or that it is profoundly evil. The point of postfeminism, or of feminism's third wave, is that our comfortable assumptions ought to be destabilized, opening up our thinking.

Such a rethinking of traditional cultural values has been the goal of a related critical effort, gay and lesbian studies. This expanding field has much in common with feminist criticism, striving to identify, recover, and appreciate work by gay and lesbian authors, as well as expose the means by which gay and lesbian people have been culturally represented. Homosexuals have certainly suffered discrimination and oppression; gay and lesbian studies works to reverse that prejudice. The most dramatic development in this field has taken the name "queer theory," transforming a harshly insulting word into an academic descriptor. The progress from gay and lesbian studies to queer theory parallels the development from feminism to postfeminism: just as postfeminism seeks to deconstruct the oppositional thinking of feminism (male versus female), so does queer theory seek to destabilize the binary of heterosexuality versus homosexuality.

Specifically, queer theory challenges the idea that there is a gay identity (just as postfeminism questions the notion of a feminist identity). There is no one way to be gay or lesbian. In fact, finally, queer theory undermines the very idea of stable sexual oppositions. Things are just much more complicated than the oppressive categories we have inherited. And the shared political aim of these stances—feminism, postfeminism, and queer theory—is to break down our preconceptions and prejudices.

It is possible, most obviously by denying the historical reality of sexual oppression, to resist the premises of feminist criticism. One can argue, for instance, that Western society has actually been structured to protect women from the brutalities of war and commerce, allowing them to be nurturers, mothers, and homemakers. Rather than exploiting or suppressing women, this line of thinking goes, Western society has celebrated and cherished them. While I have no doubt this idea may be sincerely held, and even to some degree supported, it will not stand up to analysis. It is at best too simple; and at worst, flat-out wrong.

It overlooks the way that insulation and honor are themselves a kind of suppression and exclusion. (If a woman is put on a pedestal, she can't *do* much of anything up there.) And it assumes that women are the weaker sex (emotional, unstable, passive, irrational), needing protection, unable to compete with men. But all women are not weaker than all men in any way. Many women are taller, stronger, smarter, and more aggressive than many men. These qualities are in fact the yardsticks of a man-oriented, or patriarchal, culture, but even by those values, which certainly may be questioned, generalizations about "men" and "women" are troublesome. It can be eye-opening to view movies from the 1940s to 1960s and think about how women are portrayed. Molly Haskell, in *From Reverence to Rape* (1974), argues convincingly that women overwhelmingly have been presented as either evil vixens or innocent virgins. Women either need the help and protection of men to survive, or they must deceive and corrupt men to succeed. More recent films have tended to challenge these stereotypes (think of Sarah Connor in the *Terminator* series for instance), reflecting and supporting changing values in our culture.

In fact, as queer theory emphasizes, even dividing humankind into stereotypical men and women can be problematic since there is no simple genetic or hormonal or physiological test that will clearly divide all humans into "male" and "female." Determining clear *psychological* differences between the sexes appears to be even more complex and elusive. Although we can articulate certain stereotypical ideas of "masculine" or "feminine," hetero or gay thinking, we could

not use these features to sort males and females, straight or gay perfectly—any more than we could use height, or weight, or muscle mass.

A particular individual may have the external appearance of a female and the biochemistry of a male, or vice versa, or an infinity of in-between states. We can, of course, like the Olympic authorities, impose a definition of “male” and “female,” prescribing, for example, a certain maximum level of testosterone for a “female” body, but such limits are ultimately arbitrary and subject to tampering. Racial categories are similarly subject to arbitrary definition. Even if there were some essence of “Indian” or “Negro” blood (the biological consensus is that there isn’t and that the concept of “race” is inherently problematic), where should one draw the line? Is an “Indian” someone who has two Indian parents, or is one sufficient, or one grandparent enough, or even a great-grandparent? Historically, in various cultures, individuals have been assigned to a particular racial minority with as little as one-twentieth of their genetic material purportedly coming from that race, which means, given my grandmother’s Cherokee heritage, that in some places at some times I would be considered an American Indian. Am I a Native American? I don’t know. It depends on what the term is being used to mean, I suppose.

Political criticism of every variety has struggled with such essential questions of identity: What is an African American? (Is someone with a Caucasian mother and a Black father still in the category of “Black”?) What is a “woman”? (Is this a biological category, set at birth, or flexible marker, subject to surgical or social or psychological forces?) What is the “working class”? (Must one have a certain kind of job, or a certain level of income, or a certain social outlook?) What is a “bisexual” person? (Is it desire-based or performance-based or what?) Such difficulties have led to the idea that it would be more useful to think in terms of a continuum rather than two totally distinct opposites. This insight allows us to distinguish “sex” (the biological status of male and female) from “gender” (our conceptions of “man” and “woman”). As Simone de Beauvoir puts it, “One is not born a woman, one becomes one” (301). An individual, in other words, may be born female (sex), but that status does not entail the attributes of “woman” as our culture has defined them (gender). Our conceptions of femininity (and masculinity), Beauvoir is saying, are social constructions that are imposed on individuals. Or as Thomas Laqueur puts it in his detailed history of the ways we have invented our ideas of gender, sex “is situational; it is explicable only within the context of battles over gender and power” (11); and “two sexes are not the necessary, natural consequence of corporeal difference” (243). Or as Barbara Johnson says, “The question of gender is a

question of language” (37). Or, as Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*, gender is “performative,” created by what one does, not what one is.

In fact, the more one considers the sexual diversity of human beings and the way that biological “sex” is fashioned into social “gender,” the more inadequate seems the idea of a continuum stretching from “male” to “female.” Such a continuum still depends upon the idea of “male-ness” and “female-ness,” categories from which particular individuals may differ to one degree or another. And a male-to-female continuum also ignores questions of sexual preference, which suggest another continuum ranging from heterosexual to bisexual to homosexual. Unsettling our various sexual categories has provided a rich opportunity in the arena of literary criticism for all kinds of redefinition and debate, about what it means to be a man or a woman, about how one becomes such an entity (or not), about what such processes reveal about our culture.

It is of course always possible that you just don’t agree that women have been oppressed and that generalizations based on sexual orientation or gender are dumb. What would be the purpose of feminist criticism for such a person? Can such a nonfeminist even do feminist criticism? For that matter, is it even possible for a man to do feminist criticism? At the risk of irritating or even outraging some of my readers, I think the answer is that *anyone* can do feminist criticism—a male, even a male chauvinist—and do it “honestly” in a sense. One of the wonderful things about words is that we can use them to try out ideas, to speculate, to put on roles and explore. We construct arguments and conduct analyses not only to persuade others but also to investigate things for ourselves—if we have an open, critical mind, that is. Writing is a process of learning.

If you already inhabit a feminist outlook, then applying it to literature may help you understand both the work and your outlook better. And if this way of thinking isn’t where you find yourself today, it won’t hurt you to visit and try to think like a native for a while. You’ll enlarge your vision, you may even decide to stay. At the least you’ll have a better understanding of feminist thinking. Your performance as a feminist critic (or any other sort of critic) may be an act, a role you’ve taken on, but it need not (and ought not) be an *insincere* performance. One can *pretend* to play Macbeth or Willie Loman, or one can sincerely *play* these characters. Your job is to immerse yourself in feminist criticism, genuinely attempting to appreciate its insights, regardless of whether you finally accept them.

And when is some form of feminist criticism appropriate? It’s always a possibility, an available option. The way to see if a feminist approach is appropriate is to try it out. Even if the text isn’t obviously

dealing with feminist concerns, a feminist approach may be revealing. In fact, the absence of women or their concerns may be quite significant. For some texts, admittedly, a feminist reading may require considerable care and imagination. But, again, the pervasiveness of sexual bias in our society ensures, I would argue, that most texts will readily provide ample materials for a feminist response. Just as we expose the presence of a virus by assuming its existence and then running tests to establish its effects, we ought likewise to assume the existence of bias and prejudice and make efforts to expose its effects. When feminist criticism can find nothing to talk about, when all its tests come out negative, then its work will be done. Then we can assume that traditional literary studies will sufficiently include issues of sex and gender; then we can neglect to consider the implications of our actions in the context of such issues. Then we will live in a very different world.

HOW TO DO FEMINIST CRITICISM, POSTFEMINISM, AND QUEER THEORY

According to Cheryl Torsney, feminist criticism is not a single method, but rather a patchwork or "a quilt" of different methods stitched together with a common conviction: "that one can read, write, and interpret as a woman" (180). This plurality of approaches is one reason that Robert Con Davis says it may well be "that the future of literary studies is being decided in current feminist theory and criticism" (161), as various ways of reading are woven together, blended, contrasted, and questioned. My survey of critical approaches ends with feminist criticism—as an example of political criticism—because it can draw on each of the theories described here, as well as on others. Any act of criticism, to be sure, is likely to draw on various strategies, blending together complementary and sometimes even contradictory assumptions and practices. But feminist criticism, postfeminism, and queer theory are perhaps uniquely positioned to benefit, and benefit from, other approaches.

I'll focus here then on two illustrative concerns of feminist criticism: how women have written and how women have been written. The first of these concerns deals significantly with the status of women writers, and its most influential formulation is probably Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, published in 1929. Woolf's impetus can be seen in her revealing thought experiment: what if, Woolf asks, Shakespeare had a sister, equally as brilliant and talented as Shakespeare himself? What would have become of her? She would not have

had the same educational opportunities, the same financial independence, the same social freedom or professional access. Obviously, her career would have been strikingly different from Shakespeare's. In fact, Woolf doubts that she would have had a career at all. In "Professions for Women," Woolf explains how her own career has been obstructed by narrow conceptions of womanhood, which offered virtually no role for serious women writers. In calling for "a room of one's own," Woolf is asking for the freedom and the space for all Shakespeare's sisters to speak honestly out of their own experiences, without assuming male pseudonyms or adopting masculine voices.

Some extraordinary women, as Woolf makes clear, somehow did manage to write, and this tradition of women's writing is extremely important because "*we think back through our mothers if we are women*" (79). Without some sense of these "mothers," the woman writer will be unable to make a creative room of her own, being forced instead to suppress her unique voice and attempt to fit into the mansions of the male tradition. Literary history—a *new* literary history that includes women—thus becomes a vital action, making it possible for women to write as *women*, whatever that means. (For Woolf it appears to have included the freedom to transcend gender.)

The effects of the effort to recover women's writing have been dramatic: most obviously, the canon of honored, "serious" literature has been enlarged to include more works by women (an alternative canon of women's writing has also arisen), and certain genres long considered minor or secondary have received serious attention. Women did write in the major genres (fiction, drama, poetry), but their creative energies also found outlets in letters, journals, diaries, and other long-neglected forms. In recovering this work of their "mothers," feminist critics have often invoked Woolf, attempting to describe the "precious speciality" (in Woolf's words) of this nearly lost tradition of women's writing. For Elaine Showalter, this engagement with women's writing calls for a "distinctly female vision." In *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), obviously building on Woolf's project, she uses the term "gynocriticism" to refer to this study of women by women.

The second concern has to do with the way women have been written—that is, with the image of women in literature. The most influential work here, without question, is Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, published in French in 1949. Beauvoir's point is simple but powerful: females have been depicted in literature and culture as either Mary or Eve, the angelic mother or the evil seductress. Such a representation of women, especially in works by men, serves to make women unreal, other, the absence of maleness, rather than anything positively female or mutually human: this vision is especially pernicious

when it is unnoticed and is perceived to be “natural” or “realistic.” The work of the reader, then, is to expose this opposition—misogyny (woman seen as monster) or idealization (woman seen as saint)—thereby undermining its power by exposing its artifice. Notable followers of Beauvoir’s tradition include Mary Ellman, whose *Thinking About Women* (1968) argues that gender stereotypes in literature are applied not only to characters but to *everything*; and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, whose *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) argues that women writers both accept and reject the angel vs. seductress stereotypes, thereby creating their own distinctive vision.

These two concerns—woman as writer, woman as written—can be illustrated by looking briefly at Mary Astell’s *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, published in 1692. We should note first that merely reading Astell’s work verges on a feminist act. Her *Proposal* certainly has not held a secure place in the traditional canon. In Tillotson, Fussell, and Waingrow’s popular *Eighteenth-Century Literature*, published in 1969, Astell’s work does not appear (the volume covers 1660–1800). Representative works of some ninety men do appear, spread over 1538 pages. Women writers are virtually ignored: three are represented, occupying less than two pages. Let’s recap that score: men—1538; women—1 and a fraction. In John Mahoney’s anthology for the same period, *The Enlightenment and English Literature*, published about 11 years later (1980), we might expect to see more women writers, especially given the surge of interest in feminist criticism in the 1970s. But there are in fact no women at all in Mahoney’s anthology.

Such neglect points to the need for alternative collections, such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, which covers the middle ages (fourteenth century) to the present, and presents fifteen women writers (including Astell) in its eighteenth-century section; or Roger Lonsdale’s *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, which offers the work of over one hundred women; or Robert Uphaus and Gretchen Foster’s *The ‘Other’ Eighteenth Century: English Women of Letters*, which presents in some depth the work of 22 women, including Astell. But merely offering alternatives to the traditional surveys seems to many people entirely inadequate, leaving the writing of women in a secondary, supplementary position. It is no longer plausible, after the advent of feminist criticism, to argue that women writers are justifiably omitted from the standard anthologies (“the canon”) because their writing is inferior to the writing of men. For one thing, women’s writing has gone largely unread, even in graduate survey courses, so that even “experts” in eighteenth-century literature may know little about Astell or any other female writer; one cannot say that the writing of men is better without having read the

writing of women. For another thing, the standards used to construct “the canon” are the invention of mostly male critics and scholars, who are themselves the product of the exclusion of women: women aren’t included now because they haven’t been included in the past, and the cycle perpetuates itself. Feminist criticism therefore may show how some works by women meet the traditional standards of excellence, but it may also challenge the arbitrariness of those same patriarchal notions of excellence.

Consider the following two passages from Mary Astell’s *Serious Proposal*. In the first Astell announces precisely what her proposal is; in the second she summarizes her plan. As you read these two passages, labeled A and B, respectively, pay attention to how women are presented. What images of “woman” do the passages convey? (I have numbered the sentences for easy reference.)

(A)

1. Now as to the proposal, it is to erect a monastery, or if you will (to avoid giving offence to the scrupulous and injudicious, by names which though innocent in themselves, have been abused by superstitious practices), we will call it a religious retirement, and such as shall have a double aspect, being not only a retreat from the world for those who desire that advantage, but likewise, an institution and previous discipline to fit us to do the greatest good in it; such an institution as this (if I do not mightily deceive myself) would be the most probable method to amend the present, and improve the future age. . . .
2. You are therefore ladies, invited into a place, where you shall suffer no other confinement, but to be kept out of the road of sin: You shall not be deprived of your grandeur, but only exchange the vain pomps and pageantry of the world; empty titles and forms of state, for the true and solid greatness of being able to despise them. . . .
3. Happy retreat! which will be the introducing you into such a paradise as your mother Eve forfeited, where you shall feast on pleasures, that do not, like those of the world, disappoint your expectations, pall your appetites, and by the disgust they give you put you on the fruitless search after new delights, which when obtained are as empty as the former; but such as will make you truly happy now, and prepare you to be perfectly so hereafter.
4. Here are no serpents to deceive you, whilst you entertain yourselves in these delicious gardens.
5. No provocations will be given in this amicable society, but to love and good works, which will afford such an entertaining employment, that you’ll have as little inclination as leisure to pursue those follies, which in the time of

your ignorance passed with you under the name of love, although there is not in nature two more different things, than true love and that brutish passion, which pretends to ape it.

6. Here will be no rivalling but for the love of God, no ambition but to procure his favour, to which nothing will more effectually recommend you, than a great and dear affection to each other.

(B)

7. The ladies, I'm sure, have no reason to dislike this proposal, but I know not how the men will resent it to have their enclosure broke down, and women invited to taste of that tree of knowledge they have so long unjustly monopolized.
8. But they must excuse me, if I be as partial to my own sex as they are to theirs, and think women as capable of learning as men are, and that it becomes them as well.
9. For I cannot imagine wherein the hurt lies, if instead of doing mischief to one another, by an uncharitable and vain conversation, women be enabled to inform and instruct those of their own sex at least; the holy ghost having left it on record, that Priscilla as well as her husband, catechized the eloquent Apollos and the great Apostle found no fault with her.
10. It will therefore be very proper for our ladies to spend part of their time in this retirement, in adorning their minds with useful knowledge.

Since Astell's *Proposal* is considered a feminist classic, it is interesting to note how she appears to reinforce the idea of women as weak sensualists, daughters of Eve, tending toward sin. Astell tells "the ladies" that their "confinement" will allow them to "be kept out of the road of sin," as if women can resist temptation only if they are removed from it (2). Further, she explicitly links all women to Eve, asserting that this "Happy retreat" will introduce them "into such a paradise as your mother Eve forfeited" (3). Astell's ladies will be able to reenter or recreate paradise not because they are any stronger or smarter than Eve, the epitome of feminine susceptibility, but because there will be "no serpents to deceive you" in Astell's "Happy retreat" (4).

In addition, the inducements Astell offers "the ladies" are themselves sensual, as if she can tempt them into a second paradise only by promising pleasure—in fact, the same pleasure for which women originally were ejected: In the garden of Eden, it was of course the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge that Eve could not resist; in Astell's retreat, women will get to enjoy such fruit once more, being able to "feast on pleasures" more durable than those of the world, avoiding "the fruitless search after new delights," entertaining

themselves in these "delicious gardens" of learning (3). Astell seems here to be reinforcing the stereotype that women are controlled by their appetites: to entice them to learn, she discusses knowledge as if it were food—a "delicious" and fruitful "feast." Astell further seems to accept the conventional sexism of depicting women as aesthetic objects, concluding that it is proper for women to be "adorning their minds with useful knowledge" (10)—as if knowledge were valuable as an adornment, an intellectual sort of ribbon or bow to make women more attractive. In consecutive sentences, Astell promises ladies that the retreat will "entertain" (4), providing "entertaining employment" (5), as if women seek only diversion, avoiding diligence.

This reading of Astell's *Proposal* deals admittedly with only a portion of her text, but it could be extended easily, and it illustrates sufficiently, I think, one activity of feminist criticism: exposing stereotypes of women. Although this exposure is often at the expense of male authors, we should not be surprised to find such sexism in Astell's text, despite her place as an early feminist: how could she entirely evade the assumptions of her time? As Janet Todd puts it:

If 'feminism,' in a 1970s sense, claims absolute equality of the sexes and complex identification of roles, then no women in eighteenth-century England advocated it; if it implies equal opportunity, then probably only Mary Wollstonecraft, who hinted at female politicians while extolling motherhood, might qualify. But if a feminist is one who is aware of female problems and is angry or irritated at the female predicament, then almost every woman writer and many men could claim the title. (qtd. in Ruthven 17)

We are all products of our culture, our language, our myths, and our history; therefore, attempting to identify the negative or stereotypical images in Astell's work does not constitute an attack on her. The vision of educated women in *A Proposal to the Ladies* is extraordinary.

In addition to this negative strategy of unmasking prejudices, feminist criticism also undertakes the positive business of reading women's writings with a particular attentiveness to their difference either from male texts or from the dominant discourse, supposed to be controlled by men, and therefore "patriarchal." Such a recuperative reading of these passages from Astell's *Proposal*, rather than targeting the depiction of women, might look more closely at what Astell was attempting to do with these images. How does Astell's own gender affect her discourse and its aim? As a woman, writing in the late seventeenth century, proposing a kind of "monastery" to educate women, Astell addresses her text *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, but any reflection at all must acknowledge that her audience had to include

men. It would have been impossible, after all, in her day, to create the sort of institution Astell proposes without the approval and even the active support of men. Astell depicts herself as speaking to "the ladies," but she intends to be overheard by those holding the power. How does this dual audience affect her writing?

The most obvious critical strategy would be to look for contradictions, or for assertions that can be taken two ways, or for two different phrasings of the same assertion, as Astell speaks different things to different audiences with the same text. In fact, it seems reasonable to assume that Astell's position is hardly unique, that other women writers confronted a divided audience. Indeed, for Gilbert and Gubar, a strategy of both conforming to and undermining patriarchal cultural conventions has distinguished women's writing since Jane Austen. Although Astell's work appeared over a century before Austen's, much the same (if not worse) conditions applied. What examples of a double-voiced discourse do you find in Astell's passages? For a start, we might notice that Astell first says her proposal is to "erect a monastery" for single women, but she quickly alters "monastery" to "religious retirement" (1). Astell says she makes this change to avoid the prejudice against the term "monastery," which would have linked her project to Catholic monks, who had a reputation in Astell's day, among some anti-Papists anyway, for dabbling in the supernatural ("superstitious practices," as Astell says). But Astell might have used "nunnery" or "priory" instead of "monastery"; so why did she first offer the term associated with monks, then withdraw it? Because, I would argue, "monastery" makes clear to one part of her audience that she is offering them a chance to move into a domain heretofore jealously controlled by men. By saying she wants "to erect a monastery," Astell subtly underscores the masculine privilege she wants to usurp. Lest some male readers be threatened by women assuming such erections, Astell immediately portrays her project as a "retreat," a "confinement," a withdrawal into a feminine space, not a masculine intrusion. But the empowering potential of the retreat's "delicious gardens" has already been indicated to Astell's discerning reader.

Having glimpsed this potential power, the ladies, Astell says in the second passage, will "have no reason to dislike this proposal." But, she continues, "I know not how the men will resent it to have their enclosure broke down, and women invited to taste of that tree of knowledge they have so long unjustly monopolized" (7). Earlier, Astell has taken pains to make sure her proposal is not seen as an invasion, but rather a retirement. And in the body of her proposal, Astell has repeatedly limited the ambition of her idea, making it less

threatening to men: she does not believe a woman needs to study "languages" as diligently as men, but only as "are necessary to acquaint her with useful authors"; she does not desire "that women should teach in the church, or usurp authority where it is not allowed them," but only that they be allowed "to understand our duty, and not be forced to take it upon trust for others" (p. 116). But this subsequent image reverses the earlier one of "retreat": instead of the women confining themselves, they will be *breaking down* the "enclosure" of the men. If this proposal describes a retreat, it is a retreat into the intellectual space already occupied by men.

Likewise, although Astell has repeatedly alluded to Eve's weakness, confirming the patriarchal myth of mankind's fall, and thus reassuring part of her readers that she understands the dangerous and sinful nature of women, her concluding reference to the Genesis story also reverses the implications of the earlier allusions. Somehow Eve's disastrous deed, tasting the fruit from the forbidden tree of knowledge, has become precisely the activity that men have "so long unjustly monopolized" (7). Although Astell has appeared to reinforce the male-oriented view of the fall of "man," this version of the story now becomes problematic: men have been zealously indulging in the same activity for which Eve has been unceasingly castigated. How can "tasting" of the tree of knowledge be considered evil? Isn't knowledge good? Why have men monopolized it?

Astell thus shrewdly intimates that men—with Godlike presumption—have built their own paradise or "enclosure," eating from the tree of knowledge themselves, while forbidding women to partake. Despite her earlier concessions to the limited ambition of women's learning, Astell's position in the later passage is much bolder, asserting that women are "as capable of learning as men are, and that it becomes them as well" (8). This radical position is balanced, but not obscured, by Astell's more modest stances earlier. But even these earlier references to the weakness of women can be played two ways.

For instance, when Astell points out to the ladies that her "Happy retreat" will be "introducing you into such a paradise as your mother Eve forfeited" (3), she appears to be acknowledging woman's sinful nature and offering a chance to undo the Fall. But there is a dramatic difference between the first and the second paradise: no Adam will inhabit Astell's, for it will include single women only. This lack of men does not appear in the least to be a deterrent to the ladies' happiness; on the contrary, Astell's retreat will allow women to avoid "that brutish passion, which pretends to ape" true love (5). Instead of

the love of men, which Astell suggests is animalistic, simian even, she holds out the promise of the ladies' "great and dear affection to each other" (6). The positive significance of this male absence is rather subtly conveyed by what must be seen as the most appealing aspect of this second paradise: "Here are no serpents to deceive you, whilst you entertain your selves in these delicious gardens." A single serpent ruined the first paradise for Eve (and the rest of us); but in pointing to this crucial difference, Astell uses the plural "serpents." Given the phallic symbolism of serpents, we can easily conclude that Astell is talking about bipedal serpents—the same ones who have now enclosed the tree of knowledge (which women had the courage to eat from!), keeping women out.

In this case, as I have read these passages, the negative view of women that emerges in one sort of feminist criticism (woman as written) becomes part of a positive strategy in the other kind (woman as writer).

THE WRITING PROCESS: A SAMPLE ESSAY

Let's see what opportunities a feminist approach affords a reader of the following poem, written by Samuel Johnson in 1746, about 50 years after Astell's proposal. Although he was struggling to make his reputation in 1746, Johnson would go on to become arguably the eighteenth century's greatest and most versatile writer, the second-most-quoted author in our language (behind only Shakespeare).

Before you read the poem, it may be helpful to know (if you don't already) that "Stella" was often used in eighteenth-century poetry as a kind of generic name for a beautiful, youthful, charming woman. Likewise, "nymph" in this period also usually refers to such a woman, although the word literally means, in Greek and Roman mythology, a female spirit that inhabits and somehow embodies a feature of nature. (For instance, there might be a nymph of the Ohio River, who would be the spirit of the river, standing for it and living somehow "in" it.) So a nymph or a Stella would be a beautiful woman that one could imagine being part of a lovely rural setting. "Stella" and "nymph" in this poem refer, it seems clear, to the "Miss _____" of the title. And this person seems, at some point anyway, to have been a real person: when the poem first appeared, its title was "To the Honble [short for "Honorable"] Miss Carpenter," who was Alicia Maria Carpenter, daughter of Lord Carpenter. A manuscript has the same title. But Anna Williams reprinted the poem in her *Miscellanies* with the current title; and since Johnson presumably

assisted Williams with her collection of poems (Williams was a blind poet, given lodging and support by Johnson), it is likely he made or approved of the change.

Now read the poem several times, noting your reactions and questions on paper.

To Miss _____ On Her Playing upon the Harpsichord in a Room Hung with Some Flower-pieces of Her Own Painting

Samuel Johnson

When Stella strikes the tuneful string
 In scenes of imitated spring,
 Where beauty lavishes her pow'rs
 On beds of never-fading flow'rs,
 And pleasure propagates around 5
 Each charm of modulated sound,
 Ah! think not, in the dang'rous hour,
 The nymph fictitious, as the flow'r,
 But shun, rash youth, the gay alcove,
 Nor tempt the snares of wily love. 10
 When charms thus press on ev'ry sense,
 What thought of flight, or of defence?
 Deceitful Hope, and vain Desire,
 For ever flutter o'er her lyre,
 Delighting, as the youth draws nigh, 15
 To point the glances of her eye,
 And forming, with unerring art,
 New chains to hold the captive heart.
 But on these regions of delight,
 Might Truth intrude with daring flight; 20
 Could Stella, sprightly, fair and young,
 One moment hear the moral song,
 Instruction with her flow'rs might spring,
 And wisdom warble from her string.
 Mark, when from the thousand mingled dyes 25
 Thou see'st one pleasing form arise,
 How active light, and thoughtful shade,
 In greater scenes each other aid;
 Mark, when the diff'rent notes agree
 In friendly contrariety, 30
 How passion's well-accorded strife
 Gives all the harmony of life.