

A manual for self-defence: feminist literary theory

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Introduction

Feminist literary criticism begins with the reader's choice for the perspective and interests of women. This choice leads to other text interpretations, different reading experiences, alternative literary theories and new literary histories. This choice is not tied to the historical period of feminism and therefore 'reading as a women' and the 'resisting reader' are of all ages. In the Middle Ages Christine de Pisan did this in her book *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* (*The Book of the City of Ladies*) of 1405. I will first discuss this book in order to compare it later with the 1978 book by Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader*.

Christine de Pisan begins her book – in the 'I' form – by relating how she is sitting in her study reading a book about the evil nature of women. Medieval literature and science indeed knew a popular misogynist genre, initiated by the church fathers, which was the litany against female vices. De Pisan wonders why:

so many different men – and learned men among them – have been and are so inclined to express both in speaking and in their treatises and writings so many wicked insults about women and their behaviour. ... judging from the treatises of all philosophers and poets ... it seems that they all speak from one and the same mouth. They all concur in one conclusion: that the behaviour of women is inclined to and full of every vice. (Pisan, 1983: 3–4)

At first de Pisan does not recognise this terrible 'vice' in her own experience of women. Then she thinks that all these great scholars cannot be mistaken; she herself must thus be quite stupid and ignorant. Thereupon she plunges into a great sorrow 'for I detested myself and the entire female sex, as though we were monstrosities in nature' (5). She complains to God that He has not put her into the world as a man. While she sits with 'my head bowed in shame' (6) three crowned Ladies appear, who have come to comfort her. Their message is: trust what

you yourself know for certain instead of what you only hear from others. These Ladies assign de Pisan the task of building an (allegorical) City of Women, 'so that from now on, ladies and all valient women may have a refuge and defence against the various assailants' (10), that is, de Pisan is to write a book which lists all the positive things said about women in all available sources. *The Book of the City of Ladies* is a work of defence: an encyclopedia of female inventions, learning and art, and a history of queens, army commanders, heroines and saints, who prove the stereotypical images of women to be untrue.

De Pisan's book is a medieval 'self-defence manual for the female reader', as Fetterley argues in *The Resisting Reader*. In Fetterley's book, a process is taking place which shows a striking similarity to the process outlined by de Pisan. Fetterley is not burdened by the church fathers, but rather by the American literary canon, dominated by male authors. The female reader drowns in these male images of the world, in which women and the feminine are often depicted as irritating and inferior. The texts are often constructed in such a way that every reader identifies her/himself as a matter of course with the lot and the view of the male characters. Women therefore constantly identify against themselves while reading, but do so unconsciously. They are programmed by these texts to be 'assenting readers'. As opposed to assenting and unconscious reading, Fetterley proposes a gender-conscious, resisting reading. Just like de Pisan, Fetterley discusses this in stages: first the phase of being intimidated by the authority of the male tradition; then the internalisation of its contempt for women; then the anger against the self-hatred which the culture instils in women, and finally the birth of the 'resisting reader'. Fetterley's resistance takes the form of arming women with different ways of reading the very same books. De Pisan's resistance, on the other hand, takes the form of looking for alternative texts, for different representations of women, for female subjectivity.

Christine de Pisan's feminism used the means of her time; like her medieval opponents, she wrote an encyclopedic work making use of all available sources, regardless of whether they were mythological or scientific, 'heathen' or Christian, legendary or historical.

Fetterley's resistance also uses the means of her times; she relies on the *reader-response* theory which emerged in the 1970s. Within dominant literary theory, attention was shifted from texts and textual structures to the ways in which different readers can give different meanings to a text. For Fetterley this opened up an opportunity to introduce feminist ways of reading which could no longer be dismissed as scientifically 'wrong'. The generation of feminist critics that preceded Fetterley (de Beauvoir, 1960, first edition 1949; Millett, 1969) found themselves in

another, older paradigm of literary theory; the paradigm of the immanent interpretation, in which the text was considered to have a 'correct' meaning and a timeless value. De Beauvoir and Millett see the text as a historical and social mirror of patriarchy, thus they deplore the fact that the text does not represent women's experience. They are here availing themselves of a mimetic literary view – also adhered to by Marxists – as a result of which every text is, and/or ought to be, a reflection of reality. In the climate of the early 1970s the mimetic view was revolutionary, but in the 1980s it would be rejected both by feminists and by nearly all other literary theorists in favour of more constructivist and textual theories of literature: the text does not reflect reality but constructs one (Moi, 1985). In the 1980s feminists turned to the emerging theory of reading, and deconstruction was also welcomed by feminists and developed further. Feminist criticism thus has become possible within all forms of literary theory. Moreover, feminist thinking has exercised considerable influence on modern literary theory.

I distinguish three preoccupations within feminist criticism: the critique of sexism; women's writing; and (interventions in) theory. This list reflects a chronological order. From the end of the 1970s, however, work was carried out in all these three fields simultaneously. In all three the phases of equality – difference – deconstruction also stand out, yet for the critique of sexism the emphasis lies first on equality and later on deconstruction; for women's writing it lies on equality and difference, while feminist literary theories recognize all three phases.

Critique of sexism

The first object of study for the feminist approach to literature – which itself initially occurred mainly outside universities – is 'the image of women in literature'. Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett and many others began to deliver critiques of sexism in canonic texts by male authors, who often gave a discouraging and depressing picture of female characters. According to Millett, authors like Norman Mailer and Henry Miller take pleasure in describing women as objects who can be used at will, tortured and despised. Sometimes an old fear of women appears to lie behind this sexism.

A feature of sexist texts is that the narrator takes little or no distance from denigrating images of women. I will return to the crucial role of the narrator later. In the relationships and sexuality of male authors there is sometimes a tangible element of revenge, of the unloading of old hurts onto women. The way in which old hurts are metonymically visited on women can be illustrated, for example, in the Dutch novel

Kort Amerikaans ('Crew Cut') by Jan Wolkers. When the main character, Erik, is about to rape – he calls it seduce – 'his girl', he thinks:

I'll cut you down to size, he thought. You'll give in, just like the Kraut. He recalled the German officer who had given him a slap in the face when, stepping off the tram next to him, he had trodden on his toes. (81)

Narratologist Mieke Bal analyses this passage (1988: 69–70). She is not so much concerned that this extract reflects sexism but rather with the way in which the text both reflects and produces sexism. Bal provides insight into the cultural mechanisms and textual devices – in this case metonymy – which both enable and naturalise rape:

It is clear that this boy wants to revisit his humiliation by the German officer, a powerful man, on 'his girl'. This shift from the first enemy to the loved one can only be made on the basis of what the boy sees as a similarity between the two: evidently both seem equally fearsome and threatening to him. (69)

The main character of *Kort Amerikaans* persuades his girl (Ans) that she 'wanted' sex forced upon her and even 'enjoyed' it. We are not told what the girl herself thinks. Thus *Kort Amerikaans* alienates the female reader, because the male I-figure, Erik, constantly focalises the events, that is to say that the narrator reproduces only Erik's point of view. Access to Ans's feelings and thoughts is blocked, as it were, by Erik. If the female reader wants to finish reading the novel anyway, she has to remain identified with the male central character: the novel enforces that identification. That is an identification against Ans, and by implication against women.

Mieke Bal has shown that focalisation is crucial for the point of view and experience of the narrated events (1985). Her theory of focalisation has become an essential instrument for feminist literary criticism. Because the distribution of focalisation in a text is so crucial, to recognise sexist images of women alone is not enough. The point is how those images function in the text. In some texts it is a matter of embedded sexism, used to typify a character in a negative way. Obviously, a sexist character does not necessarily produce a sexist book. Thus in *The Color Purple*, Harpo and his father Mr. — are often characterised by their sexist behaviour and ditto comments, while the reader's view of events is wholly obtained through Celie, the primary focaliser. Celie's position in the text sees to it that this sexism does not appear as obvious, as ironic or funny, but as problematic.

Through the transition from a mimetic to a more textual understanding of literature, the critique of sexism has become increasingly

differentiated over the years. Protests against the unrealistic image of 'woman' in canonical literature have been modified by the attention on focalisation and other narrative processes. Studies have been made of the ways in which specific literary genres and gender ideology are intimately connected: just think of the inevitable romance in the genre of the novel, which traditionally smothers the female subject either by marriage or by death (Blau Du Plessis, 1985). Also, analyses of narrative structures in texts have proved very important, because they have shown the textual mechanisms that reproduce the man as a subject and the woman as object (de Lauretis, 1984). Furthermore, female readers are nowadays no longer being portrayed as victims of the all-powerful text. The feminist reader sees sexist texts not so much as assaults on her mental well-being, but rather as documents of the system that she wants to denounce. In a way a sexist text serves a reverse purpose. It plays a role in feminist-political discourse, as an illustration and demonstration which undo its misogyny. As a result the sexist effect of the text is diminished for future generations of readers.

Analysis of racism in texts is just as necessary as critique of sexism. They often go together: consider the stereotype of black women as exotic, sexy and purely natural, exploited in advertisements and advertising. For a critique of racism it is necessary to reflect on one's own position as a white and/or black reader: a black reader can bring her/his own experience and position consciously into play in order to decide whether to allow her/himself to become involved with a white text. A white reader should learn to recognise different forms of racism and should reflect on her/his involvement in the colonial racism which forms an integral part of Western culture and upbringing. A specific contextual knowledge is necessary for anti-racist criticism, but otherwise the methods of analysis used in critiques of sexism can also be used for the critique of racism. Until now critique of sexism has been motivated by the struggle for equality: analyses have been directed against the unequal treatment of women in texts. Deconstructive anti-sexism and/or anti-racism is connected with the view that sexist texts are not in fact about women, but about men, just as Western or Eurocentric texts are in fact about whites. This view could only be postulated if one assumes that literature no longer mimetically reflects reality. Even a realist text is biased by its verisimilitude, that is, the text only produces an illusion of reality. The text is always a symptom of the person, the culture or the discourse of which it is the result. That insight is one of the themes in *The Color Purple*. Shug explains it to Celie, who sees God as a big old man dressed in white.

that's the one that's in the white folks' white bible [says Shug]. Shug! I say. God wrote the bible, white folks had nothing to do with it. How come he look just like them, then? she say. Only bigger? - How come the bible just like everything else they make, all about them doing one thing and another, and all the colored folks doing is gittin' cursed? (166)

Shug here shows to be a 'resisting reader' who sees through the projected character of the image of God and the Bible. As a 'resisting reader', moreover, she puts her own text against it, just like Christine de Pisan: 'God ain't a He or a She but a It.' Shug's pantheistic theology is a projection of her life-force.

Toni Morrison (1992) compares a text with a dream and reminds us that the subject of the dream is the dreamer her/himself. Instead of indignation about sexist images of women (woman as a brainless temptress) or racist stereotypes (blacks as primitives), we would profit from exploring the purposes that such fantasies fulfil for those who called them into being in the first place. What do such projections tell us about the person and the culture which nourishes these fantasies? This question prompts Morrison to analyse the function of black characters in white American literature, and the fears and repressions of whites that sustain those representations, in her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992). She shows how the construction of the 'American', the new white man in the 'heroically conquered land of infinite opportunities', depends on the presence of a black slave population. Thanks to the slaves whom he could control, whose labour he could expropriate, on whom he could blame everything that he despised in himself, the often vulnerable colonist could believe himself to be a superior American.

Just as female characters in men's texts often inhabit male fantasies, black characters in white literary texts are often figures of projection, necessary as contrast to give the white subject his identity and autonomy. In her analyses Morrison relies on theories of deconstruction. A deconstructivist exploits the tension between the manifest and the latent level in the text. The text is seen as an arena of contradictions, where culturally highly valued elements (rationality, abstract thought, domination, control, language, masculinity, whiteness) attempt to dominate over the 'other': the literal or metaphorical 'female', 'black', or that which is outside the male, white order. The effect of the literary text can be both to release and to repress the 'other'. Repression never succeeds completely. Thus the deconstructive reader is like a psychiatrist who asks questions of the resisting text, which nevertheless gives its unconscious away in slips of the tongue.

Morrison puts the principles of the different analyses into practice.

She observes, for example, that many American classics end with images of blinding whiteness (far-ranging snow-covered mountains, a glacier, a white boat, the peaks of Kilimanjaro), in combination with representations of blacks or native Americans who are dead, impotent or completely submissive. Thus Edgar Allen Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* ends with two white men, Pym and Peters, floating on a milk-white ocean. In their boat the Indian, Nu-Nu, dies and the boat shoots through the swirling white curtain of a waterfall, behind which a huge white figure rises up. The story then comes to an abrupt end. Such white figures often crop up after the appearance of a black figure, here the native American Nu-Nu. Their structural place in the story, their repeated appearance, and the suggestion of paralysis and incoherence which they convey, requires an interpretation which does justice to their ambiguity and their contradiction. On the one hand these images of whiteness appear to be a crushing counterweight against the black shadow figure, but on the other hand they also appear to say that whiteness is without significance, threatened, sterile, static, meaningless.

• Women's texts, 'female' texts

From the beginning, feminist critics nursed great expectations about texts written by women. These expectations were fed by the idea of equality – women write just as well – and by the idea of difference – women write from a different world of experiences and feelings, and their voice until now has been insufficiently heard. The initial desire for non-sexist texts about the 'real' lives of women was punctually fulfilled around 1975, by a wave of fictionalised autobiographies by authors such as Anja Meulenbelt, Lisa Alther, Marilyn French, Marie Cardinal, Verena Stefan and many others, who recorded the lives of contemporary women. When that genre became established many women writers turned ostentatiously away from the realist text in order to start writing utopian, avant-garde or absurdist texts. On an international basis the 1970s were the cradle of a new generation of female authors, who for the first time unmistakably 'write as a woman'. Authors such as Adrienne Rich, Fay Weldon, Margaret Atwood, Christa Wolf, Elfriede Jelinek shed the scrupulous sex neutrality which their predecessors (for example Iris Murdoch or Marianne Moore) had displayed.

Écriture féminine set the trend in France. *Écriture féminine* refers both to the new associative, poetic, embodied writing style of authors like Hélène Cixous, Chantal Chawaf, Annie Leclerc and Marguérite

Duras, and to a post-structuralist theory of female aesthetics and female writing. That aesthetics was not only perceived as being socially and culturally determined, but was also seen as an aesthetics connected with the materiality of the female body (Cixous), or with the metaphorical 'feminine' as a subversive force in language (Kristeva). Cixous's fictional orgies in language are clearly an attempt to unchain the female 'other' in the text. In her aesthetic philosophy she endeavours to turn the binary man-woman opposition around. Cixous and Irigaray attempt to exploit 'the feminine' as a niche which preserves everything that 'phallogocentric' culture has repressed. 'Woman' is here both the literal site and the metaphor.

Such anti-realistic texts have served a new generation of feminist critics, which lay the emphasis more on the discontinuous relationship between text and reader than on recognition and reflection. Texts do not merely reflect but also construct meanings. Texts bring something about, precisely because they 'kidnap' the readers, seduce them and bring them into collision with their own internalised clichés and established concepts. In this connection I have spoken of the erotics of reading (Meijer, 1988).

In literary theory, the interest in women writers leads to a passion for rediscovering and reinterpreting historical female authors. Comparative rediscoveries are, for example, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Djuna Barnes, Jane Bowles, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Zora Neale Hurston, Radclyffe Hall and many of the authors who have been republished in the Virago Modern Classics series. The reinterpretations carried out by feminists also shed a surprising new light on both familiar and less well-known female authors. Thus Emily Dickinson has been liberated from the stereotype of the unworldly maiden-like recluse, whose work had to be censored and 'corrected'. Virginia Woolf has been recognised as one of the founders of feminist literary criticism and as one of the most outstanding modernists. Woolf, too, had to be liberated from a stereotype: that of the fragile, frigid, apolitical, upper-class lady. Moreover, feminists developed new views on authors about whose work (often greatly reductive) interpretative traditions had already been established: the Brontës, Jane Austen, the German writers of the Romantic Movement, Sylvia Plath and many others. With respect to these rereadings it should be stressed that the great writers are not *Einzelgänger*, but are embedded in a tradition of women's writing. Thus these reinterpretations bring to light the 'lost continent' of women's literary traditions: the traces of women's culture in the Bible, female troubadours, medieval women's songs which had their roots in the oral tradition, the American sentimental novel of the nineteenth century, the English 'female Gothic',

female travel stories, detective writers, feminist science fiction, autobiographical writings, the post-war Dutch female poets, as well as lesbian literature and the rich tradition of black writers and poets in the United States. Increasing numbers of publications in the field of women's literary history, made a wholly different perception of the traditional literary history possible. Examples are Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) and Alicia Ostriker's *Stealing the Language* (1986). In addition a steady stream of anthologies of the work of female authors is appearing, of which Louise Bernikow's radical *The World Split Open* (1974) and Gilbert and Gubar's brilliant *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (1985) are representative. The work of black writers has been well represented in these overviews.

Black women's literary history and criticism started somewhat later and initially reacted against the Eurocentrism of the white feminist critics. Black critics more or less followed the same route: first they emphasised the continuity between black women's lives and their (simultaneously rediscovered and re-evaluated) texts; later they focused more on textual strategies in works by black writers. See, for example, Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987), Susan Willis, *Specifying* (1987).

The Color Purple acquires another dimension when it is read in the context of the literary black women's tradition. That tradition begins with the so-called slave narratives, with the speeches of black abolitionists like Sojourner Truth, Frances Harper and Angelina Weld Grimké, with Blues singers like Bessie Smith and Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey. Just as white women's literary history shows how until the twentieth century women writers had to fight off the prejudice that women could not develop intellectually and could not earn money by writing, so black women's literary history reveals how black women's literature originated against a background of forced illiteracy (it was forbidden for slaves to learn to read and write) and in spite of poverty and racism. The importance of language for the ability to get a grip on one's own life is also a theme in *The Color Purple*. Celie's increasing grip on language, and the instrumental role of women in that process, runs through the story as a guiding thread. Celie learns to read and write from her sister Nettie, Shug and Mary Agnes. At the same time her growing command of the language is also shown in the novel: Celie's letters become longer and increasingly differentiated. Her growing subjectivity and her grip on the world go hand in hand with the ability to put her experiences, feelings and views into words. The importance for the writers themselves of genealogy, of continuity with their 'foremothers', is shown in Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983).

There she relates how and thanks to what she has been able to find a voice.

Alice Walker is no genius in isolation. The amazing flowering of black women's literature (think also of Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, Ntokaze Shange) has a long history of continually building on each other's work and writing against oppression, as can be seen by reading the chapter on black criticism. Women's literary histories bring an insight into the continuity and relative independence of women's cultures, which largely fall outside the schools, movements and divisions of dominant literary history. In fact feminist literary historians claim the 'power of naming' and in their turn label schools, movements and stages in which women's literature is developing. One example of such a new movement is the 'Great Melancholy', the term under which I studied Dutch post-war female poets, who worked closely amongst themselves alongside the famous male poets of the same period (Meijer, 1988: 287-315). In fact feminist historiographers attempt to describe the women's cultures they have discovered as 'different-but-equal'.

However, the initial assumption that women's culture would form a completely different world has been quickly abandoned in favour of the view that women's texts are really 'bi-textual', in dialogue with both male and female literary traditions. In this connection see Showalter's essays 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' and 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness' (Showalter, 1986).

Female artists maintain a polemical relationship with the male tradition, which they both appropriate and undermine. This 'bi-textuality' was further complicated in the debate on difference in the eighties to become a multi-textuality: 'women's literature' is no monolithic whole, but is itself further divided into subcultures (ethnic, lesbian, popular cultures and different national cultures). The hypothesis of a relatively autonomous women's culture has nevertheless proved productive in collecting, reinterpreting and contextualising an invaluable quantity of material by women authors. That great and as yet incomplete task will be a condition for every future radical comparative approach, that is to say a truly bisexual and multicultural literary history.

Theory and theoretical interventions

Over the last ten years, after an initial resistance to academic theory, feminist critics have launched into great theoretical activity: they have made interventions in dominant theories, developed independent theories, and made strategic use of theories (narratology, semiotics, psychoanalysis) which are particularly suitable to feminist questions.

Interventions in dominant theories aim at introducing the category of *gender* into theories which pretend to be neutral or universal. For example, in order to be able to work with psychoanalysis, Freud's own prejudice with regard to the superiority of male sexuality and to the male super-ego needs to be dismantled. Theories of authorship – such as Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) – cannot be directly applied to women authors. Bloom recognises in literary history an Oedipal conflict between literary fathers and sons who write and, by writing better texts, 'kill' their paternal predecessors. Women who write, however, have a completely different relationship to the tradition. They often experience a primary fear of writing: a fear that they will not be able to create, that they will never play the role of 'precursors', and that therefore the act of writing will isolate or obliterate them. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) formulated a feminist theory of female authorship, the 'anxiety of authorship', in which they argue that Harold Bloom's author is not as neutral and universal as he pretended.

I will go into more detail on the feminist use of *reader-response criticism*, because here the approaches of equality, difference, and deconstruction can be easily recognised. Feminists are making important contributions to a theory of reading by looking at the role played by *gender* in the reading process. The question is whether female readers read differently from male ones. On the basis of the equality theory, the answer to this question is a whole-hearted 'yes'. Feminists argue that the same text has different meanings for female readers and male readers, because women always 'automatically' approach the text from different life experiences and identifications. Female characters speak directly to the reader's self-image. Women reading Shakespeare, according to Carolyn Lenz (1980), will pay more attention to the complexity of the female characters. They will identify more readily with Cordelia than with King Lear, with Lady Macbeth than with her husband. By extension, a possible response to Walker's *The Color Purple* will depend on the identification which you as a female and/or black and/or lesbian reader are likely to have with Celie. Every woman has some experience of feeling belittled, ill-treated and trapped at some time in her life: through Celie they can relive that experience. With Celie the reader can find release from self-hatred. Within this kind of identification, women's texts achieve a more liberating effect than men's texts, as we saw in the previous section.

However, this unproblematic appeal to female experience was soon questioned, at which stage the theory of difference was introduced. Can the female experience be immediately available, wonders Shoshana Felman (1975), amongst others. Is it enough to be a woman in order to

be able to read as a woman? Reading-as-a-woman is not an immediate effect of biological gender: it is rather a critical position, a difference, that has to be reproduced by women. Jonathan Culler indicates that distance in the second position by putting more emphasis on the word 'as' in 'reading-as-a-woman'. In her criticism of Culler, Modleski feels that this second position should rather be called 'reading-as-a-feminist'. The term feminist expresses the paradoxical relationship between being made into a woman and being born a woman. A feminist is a woman who has distanced herself from her allotted place in the gendered world. She is a woman polemically. Judith Fetterley (1978) also notes the shift from equality to difference by pointing out that women do not automatically read 'as a woman'. They may read just as men read. Women adopt the uncritical reading attitude which standard canonical literary works produce in their readers. According to Fetterley female readers are masculinised. The power of rhetorical structures of the text can only be broken down by resistant reading.

The third position can be referred to as deconstruction. Under the heading 'critique of sexism' above I defined the deconstructive way of reading as the search for the tension between the dominant, explicit, most articulated level of the text and the subversive elements active within it. The text is seen as the stage on which the struggle between the culturally dominant and the culturally repressed takes place. The reader tries to be receptive to those elements that subvert the openly disseminated message. A classic example is Felman's (1975) reading of the short story 'Adieu' by Balzac. It is the story of the nobleman Philippe, who is separated from his beloved Stéphanie in the Napoleonic war in icy Berezina. Stéphanie goes mad and dumb: she spends her life in the countryside and no longer speaks. On Philippe's return he spares no effort to induce Stéphanie to speak: in particular, she has to recognise him and call out his name. For this purpose he restages – in the dead of winter – the situation in which the parting took place. At the moment when the mad Stéphanie finally recognises him and speaks his name, she dies.

In contrast to male readers, who read 'Adieu' only as a realistic war story and treat the Stéphanie theme as an irrelevant digression, Felman reads it as a story in which the female figure, Stéphanie, has the central role precisely because she undermines the patriarchal world of men's wars. To that end Felman is reading symbolically rather than realistically. The war drives Stéphanie mad. Her madness signifies the 'other' of men's world of war. Philippe's fanatical desire to restore Stéphanie to her senses has an egocentric motive: after all, the sign of her recovery has to be that she recognises him and speaks his name.

Her normality will consist of reflecting him, giving him his identity. In this perspective, all Philippe can offer Stéphanie is a mirror function of the woman who makes him a man. Stéphanie refuses to be Philippe's 'other', however, in that particular way. Her death indicates that in patriarchy the only place for woman is derivative; as a function or part of the man. According to the French philosopher Luce Irigaray, there is in fact only one sex, the male, and the feminist task consists of discovering the yet unrepresented feminine as the other of patriarchy. The dead or as yet unborn feminine cannot exist as long as women fulfil the role of being men's shadows – this is what Felman reads with reference to Irigaray, in Balzac's fascinating story.

Conclusion

Feminist theory of reading has provided many new studies, of canon formation, periodisation, reception, literary criticism, genres and rhetoric etc. In general, feminist critics are not afraid of attacking established reputations and entering polemical debates with others and among themselves. In order to illustrate this I will end by referring to the polemical article 'Writing the Subject: Reading *The Color Purple*' by bell hooks (1990a), which does not go along with the general praise of Walker's book. After we have all given in to the overwhelmingly *happy end*, hooks observes that Walker weakens the subversive power of lesbian sexuality by making it compatible with the heterosexual order; for Walker sex cannot go together with power; Shug ends up as a vulnerable older woman who is afraid of losing her sexual power over men; Sofia, the woman who has never yielded to racist intimidation and sexist oppression, has become a tragic figure. Given the spectacular changes which take place in *The Color Purple*, hooks finds it problematic that Sofia, the revolutionary, takes no part in the happy ending. *The Color Purple* can be situated in different literary traditions: in the modern women's tradition of sexual confession and also in the line of the African-American slave narratives. The nineteenth-century slave narrative belongs to a genre from way back which, from the black perspective, gives a realistic record of the savagery of life in slavery and escape from it. This radical genre was meant to raise the political consciousness of black and white and to trigger a process of social change. hooks reproaches Walker that on the one hand she leans heavily on the slave narrative – the historical novel increases the social realism of the text – while on the other hand she depoliticises and romanticises it. Celie's liberation takes place separately from any collective social struggle and thus becomes a black female version of the old capitalist 'American Dream'.

This is a remarkable critique by a black woman who reads a black 'womanist' text as a resisting reader. Her position is thought-provoking. Read for yourself and make up your own mind.

Literature for further study

- Bal, Mieke (1985) *Narratology*.
- Culler, Jonathan (1983) 'Reading as a Woman', in *On Deconstruction*. Clear and concise introduction to the development of feminist reading theory, criticised nevertheless by various feminists. See, for example, Elaine Showalter (1987) and Tania Modleski (1986).
- Felman, Shoshana (1975) 'Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy'. Outstanding analysis of the reception of Balzac's 'Adieu', relying on Irigaray's theory in which it is stated that 'woman' cannot be articulated in our culture. Balzac's text can be read as a forceful allegory of the exclusion of woman and the feminine.
- Gates, Henry Louis Jr (ed.) (1990) *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. Collection containing authoritative articles in the field of black feminist literary criticism, including black lesbian criticism. Other important collections in the field of black criticism and literature are: Henry Louis Gates Jr (ed.) (1984) *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, and *ibid.* (1986) 'Race' *Writing and Difference*. Also Houston Baker Jr. (1984) *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*.
- Green, Gayle, and Coppélia Kahn (eds) (1985) *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*. Good compilation of essays in the field of feminist literary criticism.
- Mills, Sara, Lynn Pearce, Sue Spaul, Elaine Millard (eds) (1989) *Feminist Readings, Feminists Reading*. Good introduction with clear and practical examples of feminist methods of interpretation.
- Showalter, Elaine (ed.) (1986 orig. 1985) *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*. Handy anthology with very important articles, by Annette Kolodny, Jane Tompkins, Nancy Miller among others. Also Showalter's influential essays 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' and 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness'.
- Weedon, Chris (1987) *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Accessible introduction to post-structuralist theory.

Journals

For a general and international overview see the monthly *Women's Review of Books*, Wellesly, USA: Wellesly College Center for Research on Women.