

STUDY OF CRITICAL PATHS OF FEMINIST CRITICISM

VERSHA GUPTA

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Maharishi Arvind school of Management Studies,
Mansarover, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

ABSTRACT

The paper analyzed the pre-colonial economy of the Berom of the Jos Plateau in Northern Nigeria. The study established that the economy was not static but dynamic and complex in which the various sectors were integrated into a stable, viable and self sustained economy that was able to generate surpluses that met the socio-political and economic needs of the society. The Berom economy exhibited gender division of labour that was complementary but not competitive which ensured greater integration of women in agricultural production. However cultural beliefs and practices especially related to land ownership and labour were discriminatory and disadvantageous to Berom women.

KEYWORDS: Berom, Economy, Pre-Colonial, Production, Gender, Labour

INTRODUCTION

The following outlines are a simplified version of the most important branches of feminist criticism. The task of summary is made more difficult by the inter-relationship of the theories, and the fact that geographical boundaries commonly used to differentiate between French and Anglo-American theorists are misleading: there are similarities between, and differences within, all these positions. I have cause to thank all of them for their guidance and insight, as I have indicated within each section. Some feminist critics are worried by the lack of a central feminist creed. This, they feel, makes it all the easier to divide us and ignore our work, or to relegate us to the margins of literary study. Either we should decide that any creed would be a relic from outdated modes of study, or we should agree to construct one.

I disagree with both arguments. With its adherents' deep personal and political commitment, feminist literary criticism becomes apparent through many individual positions. The importance of such individual commitment, coupled with the freedom to break from established trains of thought, is the Common goal: in our heteroglossia lies our strength.

As Gary Taylor points out in his impressive study, **Reinventing Shakespeare**, women "had read Shakespeare from the beginning".¹ They have done much more since. As audience, readers, actresses and critics (although clearly not all feminists), women have been intimately connected with the cultural survival of Shakespeare. While it risks the charge of both sexism and selectivity, I have compiled a brief resume" of women's connections with Shakespeare as a background against which to think of twentieth century Shakespearean feminist criticism.

- **Gary Taylor, Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present, Vintage, London, 1991, p. 91.**

Shakespeare wrote the majority of his plays during the reign of one of the world's most notable female monarchs: Elizabeth I. Some of his plays may even have benefited from her direct intervention. Few today give credence to the idea that the sovereign was Shakespeare, but S. H. Burton recounts the rumors that she had a hand in the renaming of Sir John

Oldcastle as Falstaff, and in the speedy composition of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. 2 Among Shakespeare's first readers and critics were such women as the Duchess of Marlborough and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, wrote one of the earliest critical essays on Shakespeare. In 1660 the first English actresses, Mrs Hughes and Mrs Rutter, appeared in Sir Thomas Killigrew's production of *Othello* at Drury Lane 3 where, a century later, three actresses, Kitty Clive, Hanna Pritchard and Susanna Gibber were vital in the success of Garrick's management and thus of Shakespeare's continuing cultural dominance. 4 In the late 1730s a female Shakespeare supporters' group, The Shakespeare Ladies Club, encouraged revivals and new productions of the plays. Female critics grew in number: Charlotte Lennox's *Shakespeare Illustrated* (in three volumes, 1753 - 54) and Elizabeth Montagu's *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare* (1769) were widely read and frequently republished in the latter half of the eighteenth century. In 1775 Elizabeth Griffith published *The Morality of Shakespeare's Drama* while Henrietta Maria Bawdier's *The Family Shakespeare* (1807) and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807) were highly edited versions suitable for young readers, although not acknowledged as the productions of female authors for many years.5 Similarly circumspect nineteenth century school editions were mostly written by women, among them Mary Cowden Clarke's *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (in three volumes, 1850 - 51) which, like

- S. H. Burton, *Shakespeare's Life and Stage*, Chambers, Edinburgh, 1989, pp. 7 & 103 - 105.
- Judith Cook, *At the Sign of the Swan: An Introduction to Shakespeare's Contemporaries*, Harrap, London, 1986, p. 192.
- Taylor, *op. cit.*, pp. 116 -19.
- Taylor, *ibid.*, p. 206.

Helena Faucit's *On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters* (1885) and Anna Jameson's turn of the century *Shakespeare's Heroines* (1897), describes what Shakespeare's girls and ladies did when they weren't being fictional. Thus with a passing glance at the interesting fact that in 1838 the fool in *King Lear* was played by a woman, while in 1899 Sarah Bernhardt played Hamlet, and a fleeting reference to the important Shakespearean scholarship of such women as Muriel St Clare Byrne, Una Ellis Fermor, Muriel (MC) Bradbrook, and Caroline Spurgeon, first general editor of the new Arden series in the late 1940s, we arrive, at last, at Virginia Woolf.

Anglo-American Feminisms

Everything did not begin, therefore, in 1970 with Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*. Writing partly in response to Elaine Showalter's attack on Woolf in her derivatively-named *A Literature of Their Own* (1978), Toril Moi's important study *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985) provides an impassioned rallying cry in defence of Woolf, "the progressive, feminist writer of genius she undoubtedly was. **6 Woolf's ideas are still pertinent today and have informed several lines of thought in this thesis. A Room of One's Own (1929) and Three Guineas (1938)**, essays on the importance of economic independence to prospective female authors, are among the most widely-discussed of early feminist texts, while her study of androgyny and gender-swapping, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), has recently been adapted as a film. Although I have discussed concepts of androgyny in relation to transvestism in *Tower Dressing'* and assertiveness in *'The Power of Action'*, in both cases I have found it more a dangerous elision of

- **Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, Methuen, London, 1985, p. 18.**

Gender than a useful definition of a third sex. More useful has been Woolf's understanding that while female characters of wit and power shine in Shakespeare, sixteenth century women were little more than the property of their husbands. This disjunction between literary role-models and real life shows that art does not reflect life, and that a society may simultaneously hold contradictory views of the powers of women. "One is not born but rather becomes, a woman." Simone de Beauvoir's dictum has been a point of departure and also of return throughout this thesis. *The Second Sex* (1953) covered a huge field: psychoanalysis, historical materialism, myth, and the inevitable construction of the Other by any culture which endorses the idea of Self. Its sheer scale and range, encompassing much philosophical and psychoanalytical thought, prefigures the work of later French feminists such as Helene Cixous. As the 'women's movement' gathered pace throughout the 1960s, so more feminist perspectives were to be found in print, seizing on the Zeitgeist of change. Many argued that women had stayed silent too long; they should now play an active and vocal part in political and social change. Amongst the most influential of these were **Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)**, **Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* (1968)** and **Tillie Olsen's *Silences* (1972)**.

First published in America in 1970, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* remains one of the most provocatively significant feminist texts, for its ground-breaking work on the patriarchal domination of literary convention, the need to subvert ideology's attempt to control 'point of view', and the argument that literary misogyny is a cause of actual female oppression. This has helped form my own Understanding of the connections between the construction of gender in literature and life. Works that followed placed a similar emphasis on the real-world

- **Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley, Jonathan Cape, London, 1953, p. 273 (Book II).**

Significance of literary politics, including Patricia Meyer Spack's *The Female Imagination: A Literary and Psychological Investigation of Women's Writing* (1975). A number of separatist collections were also published in this decade, in particular S ho waiter's discussion of the 'literary subculture' of nineteenth century female British authors, *A Literature of Their Own: from Charlotte Bronte to Doris Lessing* (1978), one of die first feminist analyses to concentrate exclusively on work by female authors, and Gilbert and Gubar's impressive *The Madwoman in The Attic: the Woman Writer* (1979), which aimed to identify a distinctively literary tradition linking well-established writers: Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot and Emily Dickinson. Both books were attacked by other feminists, notably in **Alice Jardine's *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (1985)** and **Mary Jacobus' *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (1986)**. They were charged with capitulation to the predominantly male-constructed canon by privileging the work of already acknowledged female authors, and with ignoring the growing importance of French literary theories, as well as lacking theoretical direction.

The same decade also saw the publication of some of the most significant works for Shakespearean feminist literary criticism, amongst which I have found particularly helpful Juliet **Dusinberre's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (1975)**, **Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Thomas Neely's *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* (1980)**, **Coppelia Kahn's *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (1981)**, **Marilyn French's *Shakespeare's Division of Experience* (1982)** and **Lisa Jardine's *Still Harping on Daughters* (1983; second edition 1989)**. Recent years have produced equally thought-provoking comment, and in particular I am indebted to **Catherine Belsey's *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (1985)**, **Kathleen**

McKluskie's Renaissance Dramatists (1989), Valerie Traub's *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama* (1992) and Elizabeth D. Harvey's *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts* (1992).

While Anglo-American feminist critics have a tradition of challenging the validity of the canon of great writers, they do not often question the very idea of such a group. For them, the examination of social and cultural contexts of literary production and consumption are primary. The critical practice of "reading against the grain" is valuable for throwing into relief potential sources of conflict in the author-text-reader relationship, with the effect of exposing the hidden purposes and ideologies of all three. The reader or critic is seen as taking an active part in constructing, not simply construing meaning. The reader or critic's specific role is to practice confrontational reading and interpretation, challenging every given and questioning the author's assumptions at every point. Clearly a didactic form of literary theory, this type of criticism in its early stages, including Millett, insisted on too literal a reflection of reality through literature, and a misguided demand for positive female role models for their own sake, to both of which dangers Shakespearean feminist theory has to some extent succumbed.

French Feminisms

The late 1970s was a period of tremendous interest in a powerful, and often obscure, mixture of psychoanalysis, deconstruction and linguistics: French literary theory. French feminist critics, notably Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva (who is in fact Bulgarian), have drawn largely on the deconstructionist theories of Jacques Derrida and revisionary Freudianism of Jacques Lacan. Lacan's psychoanalytic explanations of the development of children and their assumption of their place in the world is described as the transition from the Imaginary (harmony with the mother; a sense of integrity and of being at one with the world) to the Symbolic Order (a fracturing of the relationship with the mother, imposed by the father [or Law of the Father]). This rite of passage entails a permanent sense of loss. Selfhood, particularly for the female, is seen as a sense of loss: the self is absence. Cixous and Irigaray expound theories of a disruptive, politically anarchic, female voice and language, *Ventre feminine*. Their focus on women's sexuality and bodies as the primal locus of creation surprisingly links them to stereotypical images of motherhood and nurture. Their position is analogous to a permanent opposition to a male government, which forever places woman in the role of the other at the same time that it attempts to avoid attempts at fixed definition. This inversion of misogynistic assumptions into positive strengths, and the problems it raises for feminist criticism has been particularly relevant in my discussions of idealised portrayals of women and female sexuality and the internalisation of patriarchal attitudes by female characters.

Cixous' theory of an *écriture féminine* sees creation (which here encompasses both reading and writing) as a sexual as well as a literary act, a point at which words and their meaning fracture in orgasmic liberation. Unfortunately, this implies that women are defined by a particularly narrow understanding of their physical nature, as sensuous, fluid beings. It confirms their exclusion from (male) normality, without examining or challenging such definitions. It is a theory which accepts, even justifies, women's relegation to the margins of experience and power. As emotional outpouring, Cixous' work is impressive (and inconsistent), but also unlikely to be read by the 'typical' woman whom she apparently wishes to address, and whose existence she alternately asserts then denies.⁸ Cixous' approach exults in the marginalised status which the prevailing

- **Helene Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. Keith Cohen & Paula Cohen, in Elaine Marks, & Isabelle de Courtivron (ed.), *A Few Fractions* Harvester Press, Brighton, 1981, pp. 245 - 64, pp. 245 - 8**

Patriarchy has imposed on women and their writing. Her suggestion that works written by men and women are complementary polarities, and that the author's sex (if she is a woman, her body) writes the text, substitutes one set of sexist stereotypes for another. By contrast, Julia Kristeva asserts that 'woman' is a social construct rather than a biological sex. This is much closer to my own understanding of the workings of gender in Shakespeare. For Kristeva, women do not have an exclusive right to this subversive language, simply a stronger claim in that they have realised the possibility of its existence and purpose ahead of men. Rejecting a male-female dichotomy (which Cixous denies and then reconstructs), Kristeva sees the danger "of creating within feminism an enclosed ideology parallel to the ideology of the dominant class." She focuses on the deconstruction of gender, while advocating its usefulness as "an advertisement slogan for our demands." Her stance is overtly political and joined with other power struggles: she urges feminists to "get out a bit from 'among women', from among ourselves." Kristeva's status as a feminist has been called into question by others who take exception to these attitudes. I take issue with French feminists' overwhelming concern with psychoanalysis, parent-child relationships, fixations, difference and otherness. I am also wary of the weight given to authorial intention prevalent within psychoanalytic interpretations of Shakespeare 'the man' rather than of his plays which is particularly intrusive through discussions of Shakespeare's personal attitude towards female sexuality. Several feminist literary critics have developed Cixous' suggestion of complementary sexual polarities in relation to Shakespearean criticism, including Linda Bamber, Marilyn French, and CoppeTia Kahn (see bibliography for full details). Their work on the correlation of gender

- **Julia Kristeva, 'Woman Can Never be Defined', *Bans*. Marilyn A. August, in Marks, & de Courtivron (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 137 - 41, p. 141.**

and genre in Shakespeare's plays, in particular Bamber's assertion that "whatever matters most in tragedy, comedy and romance - Shakespeare associates with the feminine" has been valuable throughout the preparation of this paper

Marxism & JFemimsism

While eschewing a formal union, feminism and Marxism have a fruitful and continuing dialogue. Both are concerned with social change, not simply literary theory; both have an explicit commitment to play a role in that transformation: both are political. They agree that history is not fixed, nor is our relationship with it; author, text, reader/audience, history, ideology and the versions of reality which each presents to the other are highly mediated, engaged in an ever-fluid dialectic. The leading Marxist literary critics have tended to be men and most have remained cautious about fully embracing feminism. British critics such as Cora Kaplan, studying the links between ideology and psychoanalysis,¹¹ and Michele Barrett, working on ideology as the site of gender construction,¹² have been amongst the most important Marxist-feminist critics. Feminists have gained much from Marxist attention to the access to the means of literary production. It could be argued that Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* and *A Room of One's Own* are Marxist feminist works, because of their realisation that the ability to become an author is governed primarily by economic independence, a state to which 'Judith' Shakespeare could never aspire. Marxists and feminists share a perception of culture, and literature, as means through which people experience their societies and their times. The

- **Bamber, op. ciL, pp. 5-6.**
- **Cora Kaplan , 'Pandora's Box: Subjectivity, Class and Sexuality in Socialist Feminist Criticism*', in Gayle Greene, & Coppelia Kahn (eds.), *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, Methuen, London, 2000, pp. 146 - 76.**
- **Michele Barrett, 'Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender', in Judith Newton, & Deborah Rosenfelt (eds.), *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture*, Methuen, New York, 2004, pp. 65 - 85.**

Works which they analyse, and their reasons for analysing them, are seen as being directly connected to the way life is lived - and how it might be lived differently. Women are subject not only to the usual ideological oppression of capitalist society, but also to sexual politics (or in Marxist terms a gender super structure). This superstructure attempts to prevent women from earning money and insists on devaluing female experience in contrast to male: a further layer of ideology which constructs particular expectations of gender and then uses these expectations as weapons of increased economic and political oppression. I shall argue that the construction and manipulation of gender in Shakespeare is inconsistent and often unconsciously directed towards a political end, the suppression of female power, and in analysing this, feminist-Marxism has proved particularly thought-provoking. Feminist Marxist criticism concentrates on language as a tool that comes to the author saturated with ideological, male-dominated significance; hence the concentration of feminist linguistics on phallogocentrism which I have discussed throughout 'The Power of Language.' Marxist criticism, like much feminist criticism, privileges the place of authors in their own work. Even if authors are unknown, their sociological and ideological position is indicated in the text. Just as politically progressive authors are favoured by Marxist critics, so are female authors by gynocritics. Unfortunately this verges on seeing literature as a vehicle in which the 'correct' gender or ideology may express itself, tempting critics to reward authors on the basis of their political correctness.

The establishment of stronger ties between Marxism and feminism has been hampered by the fact that literature is seen by both as a product of a certain set of sociological and economic forces which have affected different sexes differently - in effect by a Shakespeare's sister syndrome which has left gaps not just in the literary canon, but also in the fabric of our historical perceptions. Often there are silences instead of recorded voices: both Marxism and feminism concur on the need to re-evaluate history itself as the record of a diverse set of social and gender groups. Feminist-Marxists acknowledge that sex can be a significant determinant of ideology, which in turn constructs gender. Women who are part of a socio-economically dominant class, and whose interests are therefore supposedly represented in and by orthodox ideology and established culture, are in fact in a very different position from their male peers. For example, in the prevailing paternalistic ideology of this country at this time, a wealthy man and his male employee may find pornography reaffirms both their world views. Hence Shakespeare's bawdy and the misogynistic myth and metaphor evident throughout his plays assert the dominance of a patriarchal culture and provide the context within which female characters exist This simultaneously constructs contradictory ideas of the validity of female power. Female characters are shown to be effective and assertive even as the context within which they operate is shown to be fundamentally misogynistic. This is a point which I have discussed with particular reference to 'The Power of Action' and in 'The Power of Language.' Some feminist critics, including Kathleen McKluskie, argue that such misogyny plays an important role in the plays' construction of their own specifically male audience. 13

The relationship between literature and ideology is not one of simple reflection. There are a great many factors mediating characters' holding-up of any mirror to nature. This is particularly important to feminists who are seeking to relate these plays to actual life either in the sixteenth century or today. The fusion of Marxist and feminist criticism is particularly useful because of their shared political roots and belief that by raising awareness of oppression of all kinds in and through literature and criticism, they may play a part in its end. Psychoanalysis, while a significant mainstay of many branches of feminist criticism, has been brought into perhaps its most fruitful dialogue with Marxist

- **Kathleen Mccluskie, "The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and Shakespeare: King Lear and Measure for Measure", in Jonathan Dollimore, & Alan Sinfield (eds.), Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1985, pp. 88-108, p. 96.**

Politics and feminism in Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974), which includes a thought-provoking re-evaluation of Kate Millett. Particularly important for raising consciousness of the political significance of Shakespeare's plays in recent times has been Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield's *Political Shakespeare, New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1985). This collection of essays incorporates material from several critical perspectives, including Marxism and feminism, and presents a fruitful dialogue between critics concerned primarily with "historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis".¹⁴

Gynocriticism

Gynocritics are embarked upon a re-examination of the Canon of Western literature. They argue that men's greater access to education and to the production and consumption of literature has meant that Western literature has been dominated by patriarchal texts and interpretations which have had a vested interest in perpetuating established misogynies. As the name suggests, this group of critics concentrates on the works of women authors, and to an extent argues the case for the superiority of the female experience of life. They incorporate dimensions of most of the ideas outlined in this section. This thesis is not concerned with the works of a female author, but where I discuss the works of female feminist critics I may be seen to belong to this group, although I have also found the work of male feminist critics, and both male and female critics who are not feminists, invaluable.

Works such as Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements and Isabel Grundy's *The Feminist Companion to Literature in England: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present* (1990), challenge and extend the existing canon of female authors. **Tillie Olsen's *Silences* (1972) concentrates on the problems of writing as**

- **Dollimore & Sinfield, op. cit, p. vii.**

a young mother while Michelene Wander's *On Gender and Writing* (1983) suggests that child-rearing provides the inspiration to write. Gynocriticism is extremely valuable for its work in challenging the established range of literature and examining the criteria employed in deciding who is a great writer. The assumptions uncovered have implications not only for literary criticism, but also for the teaching and study of history, since any study of a female literary tradition is often a study of what has not been recorded. Gynocriticism therefore has links with sociological and historical research on hitherto under-represented groups excluded from the mainstream of history as well as literature because of their class or race, or other factors as well as sex.

Gynocriticism highlights the important point that works by women are not automatically free of male dominance, for example in Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983) or Catherine R. Stimpson's

discussion of the genre of the lesbian novel.¹⁵ Gynocriticism argues that a female writer can be thoroughly imbued with 'male' or traditional views, in particular about women, and can thus 'write like a man'. Similarly, women readers can be encouraged to 'read as a man'. Elizabeth D. Harvey's *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts* (1992) questions whether the creations of male authors, which at some level the reader assumes to 'be' female, can in any sense be considered such, since they are the product not only of male authors, but also of a culturally constructed view of the female psyche and voice, and are thus projections of an entirely male view. The internalisation of patriarchal values by female characters is a constant reminder that these are highly mediated figures. Such questions concur not only with sociological research on perceptions of women in Western culture, but also with the massively economically influential world of advertising and the media to which most of us are subject. To a greater or lesser extent, all feminist critics are gynocritics.

- **Catherine R. Stimpson, 'Zero Degree Deviatrcy: The Lesbian Novel in English', in *Critical Inquiry* 8, Number 2, Winter 1981, pp. 363 - 79.**

Within gynocriticism, as within French feminism, critics employ traditional arguments to subversive ends. Celebrating the fundamental difference (superiority) of women's experience of life, they focus on physiology and 'nature' in the importance of menstruation and child-birth, which they suggest gives women a greater link with creative forces. However this approach coincides with received opinion, concentrating on the biological attributes which have traditionally been seen as weaknesses, and which are now claimed as strengths. Such criticism runs the risk of establishing new biological essentialisms which justify patriarchy. I have discussed the problems raised by overtly positive endorsements of the female in both 'The Power of Language' and 'The Power of Sexuality & Desire.' At its most extreme, separatism is not progress, but stalemate.

Feminist Linguistics

Many feminists argue that language, both in the available lexicon and grammatical structure, privileges men and must alter to accommodate the female voice. Feminism and linguistics are modern terms but women have long argued that their access to and use of language is different from that of men. For Seventeenth century women such as Dorothy Osborne and Margaret Cavendish, the overblown, classically-derived style of their male contemporaries were a subject of scorn. Feminists today are still debating the difference between male and female use of language. The most important topics of debate centre on two different ideological positions: that of acknowledging the limitations of language while working to change and improve it; and that of seeking to prove the existence of, or to establish, a distinctly female language.

All branches of feminist criticism see language, as it is currently constituted and used, as a male weapon. Fighting against phallogocentrism (the dominance of the phallus/pen) -a concept also dominant in psychoanalytic feminist criticism - feminist linguists see the use of language to decide who is heard, what is given high cultural status, and how experiences, people and objects are defined, as a male-led impulse of rationalisation, to which women can react either by rejecting it altogether (perhaps in favour of Cixous' female language), or changing it from within, exposing how it works, and what it is doing. This, I believe, is a more productive path. Feminist linguists ask challenging questions about the raw material of literature and communication: who says what, to whom, how, when, where and why - or why not? In particular, they raise key issues of communication between and within the sexes, and examine the affect of language on gender, and vice-versa. Recognising the central and active force of language in the construction of gender, feminist linguists draw our attention to the fact that, as literature does not simply reflect life, so language does not simply record experience.

Linguistics is one of the most politically charged areas of feminist discussion. By examining the idea of the silenced woman, feminist linguists draw attention to the cultural production of circumstances which have hitherto been assumed to be normal. They examine a diverse range of concerns, from the hesitancy of such great women writers such as the Bronte sisters or 'George' Eliot to declare their sex, to the rationale of why men still apologise for swearing 'in front of the ladies'. The issue of women's talk also raises the significance of other traditions apart from the literary. For women, particularly within economically underprivileged groups, access to education has been much less than that of men. Still today, female illiteracy outweighs male in the Third World and in many parts of the First. Female literacy is of primary importance in world-wide programmes of contraception, which are aimed at helping women towards greater economic independence.

Feminist linguists argue that oral traditions, myth, story-telling and gossip are all important parts of a distinctly female linguistic culture, which, until this century, has been largely dismissed as an inferior sub-culture, associated with the home and child-rearing. Most feminists acknowledge the importance of economic and social conditions on specific genres of women's writing, including the domestic confinement which originally made the novel women's own. Similarly, many feminists are concerned with women's access to language, a Theme which finds some common ground even between Showalter and Woolf! For feminist linguists as for Marxist-feminists, the political impact of the context of writing is fundamental. The difference between them lies in how they choose to address it French feminists, including Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, have argued the case for a distinctly female language.

Cixous suggests that this already exists in the synaptic lapses and irrationality of language. Yet rejoicing in the existence of an irrational and supposedly female language relegates women to irrationality - a site patriarchy has previously reserved for them - and verges on agreeing that women talk nonsense, or that nonsense is female. Irigaray suggests a Utopian vision of new grammatical structures and a different female language which will somehow be better than our present language. By using such critical paths within Shakespearean criticism, it is possible to examine whether the language female Characters use suggests an alternative female language and meaning within Shakespeare's plays that is distinct from that of the male characters and from the patriarchal context within which female characters speak.

But language outside the plays cannot be so well controlled that we may simply replace old systems and impose new. Where would this new language come from? Who would use it? In the United States, the phenomenon of Political Correctness (PC) has attempted to ban racially and sexually offensive terms, particularly on university campuses. However its most disturbing effect thus far has been to provoke allegations of a 'thought police', obscuring its laudable aim of discrimination-free communication. Other feminists concentrate on the language we already have, particularly on the idea of naming. Sociolinguistic and anthropological studies such as Zimmerman and West's work on the gendered differences evident in the way in which men and women speak to and interrupt each other in conversation have provided significant background material for feminist linguists.¹⁶ Drawing on the work of anthropological linguists such as Sapir and Whorf in early twentieth-century United States, Dale Spender's *Man Made Language* (1980) examines the importance of naming in the construction of our place in and understanding of the world. The fact that this process of naming is not random or neutral, but is based upon past meaning and patriarchal perspectives is central to her work.

Cheris Kramarae and Paula Treichler's *A Feminist Dictionary* (1985) has been compiled to challenge the stereotypical definitions of supposedly objective existing word-bibles. Robin Lakoff has been attacked as an 'anti-feminist' feminist linguist, particularly for her *Language and Woman's Place* (1975). Nevertheless, her insistence that women's

language is different, and in her view inferior, to men's is instructive because it focuses our attention on why this might be so. Within the context of Shakespeare's plays, such critical paths raise important questions about the context within which female characters speak and are heard, and the specifically gendered circumstances of the creation, and reception, of what they say. The context of creation and reception is of primary concern for feminist linguists who are seeking to explore whether words are sexist or sexed in themselves, or only become so according to where, why and by whom they are spoken. Are words divisible from meaning; is language a system or a process? These questions are similar not only to those asked by all linguists, but also to other feminist critics who stress the fluidity of meaning as an indication of the presence of a subversive 'female' aspect of language. Feminist linguists recognise that misogyny is dangerously accessible and familiar. In a quite

- **Don H. Zimmerman, & Candace West, 'Sex roles, interruptions and silences in conversation', in Barrie Thome, & Nancy Henley (eds.), Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance, Newbury House, Massachusetts, 1975, pp. 105 - 29.**

CONCLUSIONS

I have a profound belief in the power of the word. I see my task as offering my opinion as to how and why women have been misinterpreted and misrepresented, not only and not always by men, through language. The importance I attach to the way in which ideas and language affect action, people's opinions of themselves and others, and their approach to life, whether on stage or off, has led me to study an author widely recognized as a consummate master of the English language. My version of feminist literary criticism is an analysis of the effect of words on women and of women on words.

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