

Feminism & Plato

Definitions from the Readings/Lecture

1. Gregory Vlastos: "[Feminism means] Equality in the rights of persons shall not be denied or abridged on account of sex"
2. Claire Curtis' Definition:

The Three Stages of Feminism According to Kristeva

According to Julia Kristeva (a French feminist) the feminist struggle "must be seen historically and politically as a three-tiered one, which can be schematically summarized as follows:"

1. Women demand equal access to the symbolic order. Liberal feminism. Equality.
2. Women reject the male symbolic order in the name of difference. Radical feminism. Femininity extolled.
3. (This is Kristeva's own position.) Women reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine metaphysical. (Moi 12)

Complicating Those Stages: American Feminism vs. French Feminism

A. American Feminism (usually associated with what Kristeva calls "liberal feminism")

1. Gender is a social construct, not a biological difference
2. "sameness": in so far as women are like men, they deserve equal rights. Political focus on obtaining the vote, reproductive rights, equal pay, etc.
3. In literary criticism: a focus on the constructions of gender in texts, representations of women, integrating women into the canon
4. Key Figures: Sherry Ortner, Adrienne Rich, Bell Hooks, Nancy Chodorow, Gerda Lerner, Mary Daly

B. French Feminism (usually associated with what Kristeva calls "radical feminism")

1. For biological and cultural reasons, women are different from men. Women are more "moral, nurturant, pacific and philosophically disinterested, where males are competitive, aggrandizing, belligerent and self-interested" (Cott 50)
2. Because of their (superior) differences, it is essential that women have "equal access to education, work and citizenship...to balance society with their characteristic contribution" (Cott 50)
3. In literary criticism: a focus on feminine utopias, the search for a "feminine" aesthetic and language, the body, how to escape a male bias, poking fun at phallocentrism & the phallus.
4. Key Figures: Simone de Beauvoir ("woman as other"), Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Margarite Duras, Monique Wittig (Kristeva & Wittig are particularly concerned with stage 3 above)

NOTE: It is important to remember that these are tendencies, not laws. There are major exceptions to each of these categories. Indeed, in the U.S. arguments of "difference" were essential to the rhetoric surrounding the right to vote. Similarly, recent attacks on white feminism in the U.S. have focused upon how cultural, class, and sexual differences can enhance & shape feminism.

Bibliography

- Cott, Nancy, "Feminist Theory and Feminist Movements," *What is Feminism?* ed. Mitchell. & Oakley. NY: Pantheon, 1986
- Marks, Elaine & Isabelle de Courtivron. *New French Feminism*. NY: Schocken, 1980.
- Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. London: Routledge, 1985.

How to Do Feminist Criticism

Unlike most of the previous types of criticism that I have mentioned, feminism willingly acknowledges its political bent. On a basic level, feminist criticism is interested in how gender oppression is reflected, criticized, or perpetuated in literary works. In the last thirty years, feminist criticism has moved away from merely discussing "representations of women in texts" to more complex issues such as what types of language are particularly female, whether the relationship between the reader and the text is encouraged to be "voyeuristic" (a "male gaze"), whether texts allow women to exist in terms other than opposition to a masculinity and a male aesthetic, and how race, class, and sexual oppression work to reinforce and complicate notions of gendered oppression.

How to do a Feminist Reading:

1. Investigate how gender is being constructed in the text.
2. Do the representations of women reflect, criticize, or perpetuate the patriarchy? (Ask same of the representations of men.)
3. What is the relationship between the reader and the text? Are we encouraged to participate in the text or to distance ourselves from it?
4. What type of language does the author use? How does she (he) use it?
5. What is the power relationship between you the writer and the material you are discussing? Can you equalize that relationship in any way?

For example, for Monday you might ask yourself:

1. How is "femininity" defined in this text? How is masculinity defined? How does this compare to other texts we have read?
2. Do the representations of women perpetuate the patriarchy? In what ways?
3. What kind of language does Plato use? Is rhetoric intrinsically masculine?
4. How does the text speak to you as a gendered individual?
5. Are women valued in this text? On what terms? Do men and women have to be equal for women to be valued?

Assignments with rely upon Feminist Criticism:

Topics which ask the writer to discuss the hierarchies, power dynamics, or representations of gender and sexuality within a work.

Bibliography & Resources

- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: U. of Minn. P., 1983.
Lynn, Steven. *Texts and Contexts*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.
Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics*. London: Routledge, 1985.
Vesterman, William. *Literature: An Introduction to Critical Reading*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993.