

**Elaine Showalter, ed. *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 403 pp., \$13.95 paper.**

Two publications important in the study of women's literature appeared this spring—*The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, edited by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and this anthology of previously published essays on feminist literary theory. These volumes will probably have greatest impact on university courses in women's literature, but one should not overlook their significance for ethnic studies. Like studies in ethnic literatures, feminist criticism has before it the task of defining a tradition outside of the main-stream and establishing a literary canon not previously acknowledged as valid.

For this volume Elaine Showalter selected eighteen essays to represent the writing of feminist critics from 1977-1983. All of them except Barbara Smith are in academic professions and many of them are well-known—Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Carolyn Heilbrun, Annette Kolodny and Lillian Robinson. None of the selections is an excerpt and all are concerned primarily with the theoretical rather than the practical implications of canon formation, feminist aesthetics, female culture, gender defined language or sexual preferences. This is the first anthology to single out as its concern feminist literary theory. Because of the quality and range of the selections it is likely to contribute significantly to the discussion in the next years.

As one might expect, the essayists argue with the received standards for literary quality, with establishment literary theorists, with editors of anthologies who have excluded women writers, and with male dominated Departments of English. More interesting, however, is the debate they hold among themselves as they struggle to construct workable definitions of feminist perspectives and to build a counter-canon of women's literature. Not all agree about the efficacy of the discussion of theory to empower its participants to alter the political and economic power structures, but they do agree that women reading and women writing are at the very heart of feminism.

One of the most arresting voices in the group is that of Barbara Smith, whose essay, "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977), is cited by many of the other writers in the anthology and whose rhetoric brings the exclusion of black lesbian writers from the feminist critique powerfully to the fore. She writes that the function of criticism is to make "a body of literature recognizable" (p. 169) and that the function of her criticism is to discuss the dimensions of literature which is black, feminist, and lesbian. Her discussion of Toni Morrison's *Sula* as a part of that tradition is engaging more for its revelation of the difficulties of defining an exclusively lesbian feminist aesthetic than it is as a persuasive reading

of that powerful novel. Deborah E. McDowell takes issue with this interpretation in her essay, "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism." She attacks Smith for lacking rigorous textual analysis in identifying the defining features of the lesbian sentiments within women's writing. It is a weakness of this anthology, perhaps its only weakness, that the issue of black feminism is discussed primarily in the context of lesbian concerns in that the only two essays which reflect directly the struggle of minority women also consider the double minority status. Lillian Robinson is probably correct when she observes in her contribution to the volume that the feminist critical establishment more readily accepts the reality of lesbian literature than it does the significance of black women writers.

Though she does not address ethnic literatures directly, Nina Baym's critique of the exclusion of writing by women from the canon of American literature encompasses (if only by implication) the exclusion of all writing which is not at once male, middle-class, and Anglo-Saxon (or at least identified ethnically with white ancestry which had a place in American before the great tides of 19th century immigration). Certainly the literature defined as American, and therefore worthy of inclusion in the canon, relied on the notion of a vast unsettled wilderness as a stage for the acting out of great individualism and ignored the fact that the land was already settled by invisible Native Americans and that the freedom implied in asserting the individual above society was not available to Americans of color. Baym shows how the critical establishment defined literary values which, because they exclude so much, made an anthology of this kind both necessary and possible.

Providing further testimony to the wealth of writing which has been developing in academic circles during the previous decade, Elaine Showalter concludes her anthology with an eighteen page bibliography of Feminist Critical Theory with a section devoted to Black Feminist Criticism. For those interested in participating in the scholarly exchange, she offers encouragement and assistance by including a list of the names and addresses of current journals publishing feminist criticism.

— Faye Pauli Whitaker  
Iowa State University