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Vladislava Gordić Petković
University of Novi Sad
Faculty of Philosophy

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CONSTRUCTING GENDER ROLES IN LITERATURE AND CRITICISM: ELAINE SHOWALTER AND ANGLOPHONE WOMEN'S LITERARY HISTORY¹

Abstract: *Gynocriticism constructs a new perspective of women's literary history and explores the creativity of women against the male-oriented literary canon. As the main representative of this critical practice, Elaine Showalter advocates the intention to study the production of women's writing in relation to female experience, and the new perspectives of gender roles in literature. This paper focuses on literary representations of gender in the 1990s, the decade that, according to Showalter, is a watershed of women's struggle to be accepted in the literary canon, but also the period of the flowering of postfeminism. Sarah Waters, Ann Beattie and Gloria Cigman are those contemporary women writers whose work is outlined in order to parallel Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, an insightful narrative of female confinement which needed decades for a breakthrough but has persisted as a unique metaphor of the women's literary tradition in the making.*

Keywords: *gender, women's writing, postfeminism, media.*

When contemplating about the subject of women's writing, Virginia Woolf first wondered what the words «women» and «fiction» meant at all. «They might mean simply a few remarks about Fanny Burney; a few more about Jane Austen; a tribute to the Brontës and a sketch of Haworth Parsonage under snow, some witticisms about Miss Mitford, a respectful allusion to George Eliot; a reference to Mrs Gaskell and one would have done.» (Lee 1984:3). *A Room of One's Own* proposes both the necessity of financial independence for women who write and the necessity of an imaginative space they should occupy. Woolf also proposes a creative sisterhood whose transcendental influence makes it possible for ordinary women to write and struggle for independence. The history of feminist struggle has con-

tinued ever since to update the issue of sisterhood, either by accentuating its power in the sixties, or by explaining that it needed redefinition in the postfeminist era that begun in the nineties.

Elaine Showalter's seminal book published in 2009, *A Jury of her Peers*, examines the continuity of American women's writing, positioned within pertinent social and historical contexts. This ambitious achievement offers a survey of women's writing in three and a half centuries of American literary history, and attempts at illustrating all the radical changes in the ways gender and literature are represented today. Wishing to reshape American literary heritage, Showalter attempts at making the invisible elements of culture visible and present, with the ambition to focus on those American women writers who have been marginalised and neglected. Keeping in mind Virginia Woolf's controlling image of «a room of one's own» as the main prerequisite for the creativity of women after having been freed from the daily drudgery of domesticity, Showalter carefully follows a chronological organisation

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to confirm her thesis that American women writers have escaped from the confinement of domesticity and social pressure and now are free to «take on any subject they want, in any form they choose» (Showalter 2009: xvii). Reminding us of the phases in women's writing, which she herself described and explained as «feminine», «feminist» and «female», the author proposes a fourth stage she decides to call «free», meaning that American women writers in the twenty-first century can take on any subject they want, in any form they choose after they have finished their search for identity and a specific artistic creed.

Any alternative history of female networking could parallel, in a highly symbolic manner, the seclusion and liberation of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's nameless protagonist of her critically acclaimed story *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The importance of this work for the American literary tradition lies in the fact that it continues to function as a powerful allegory of reading the range of women's issues concerning personal achievement and creativity. According to Showalter, Gilman «used her writing to fight back against confinement» (Showalter 2009: 224) and produced «an impossible narrative» of the narrator who expresses her anger both toward men and medicine, struggling both to redefine her motherhood and to articulate her own textual power. This story, which needed decades for a breakthrough but has persisted as a unique metaphor of women's literary tradition in the making, deals with the social struggle against male domination, presented through a story of a female patient captured by her doctor who is at the same time her husband. The story is set in a colonial mansion, which the unnamed heroine perceives as «queer» and «haunted», and her mixed feelings of awe and enchantment echo the reaction to the setting in a typical gothic novel. Her room could be described as a scary version of «a room of one's own», since it, with its barred windows and iron bed, resembles a prison and mental asylum: contrary to our expectations, this is not a place to nurse the ailing or control the criminal, but rather a bleak quarter which induces sickness, derangement and madness. The very same

issues of confinement and liberation Gilman is focused on will occur in the novels by Sarah Waters, projected as the images of bleak prisons and haunted mansions of the Victorian age, but the women characters are nevertheless set on achieving sexual freedom and rethinking the concept of emotional attachment.

Showalter is not the only feminist critic who claims that Gilman's story covers all the most important issue of women's literature: it gives voice to rebellion against the patriarchal society, also dealing with highly ambivalent issues of maternity and female creativity, the impulses inevitably clashing throughout the literary history of women. The main character's fixation upon the yellow wallpaper could be interpreted both as her rebellion against the patriarchal society and the male-centred writing. The story dramatises the concept of female captivity, the house and the room symbolising a woman's body and her wish to break free from restrictions. Being treated as both an invalid and a prisoner, which is another symbolic implication of women's status, the heroine has to recover her freedom first.

Following in Gilman's footsteps, women writers have used the prose genre to map out an alternative, female historical landscape, and to rewrite the traditional, male-centred historical narrative, finding ways to appropriate plots and characters and endowing them with new meanings and perspectives as Jean Rhys did with the plot of *Jane Eyre* or Gloria Cigman with the well-known *Wife of Bath*. According to the scenario Elaine Showalter explicated, the 1990s marks the endgame of female struggle for equal acceptance within the traditional male canon.

Showalter's book also signals the change women's literature went through in critical theory and media representations. The notion of postfeminism has surfaced repeatedly in books and articles over the years to denote individualism, and the gradual lapse of sisterhood which was essential to the second-wave feminism. According to Rosalind Clair Gill, there are three ways to understand postfeminism: as an epistemological shift, a historical transformation, and a backlash against feminism (Gill 2007: 249). It can also be conceptualised as a sensibility closely

related to contemporary neoliberalism. Postfeminism signals an epistemological break within feminism, and its move towards influences of postmodern, poststructuralist and postcolonial theory. Being a reaction against feminism, postfeminism also suggests moving towards problems and concerns substantially different from those focused on by feminism.

Despite the change of theoretical concepts, some concerns of women's writing have not changed at all, as can be seen in the fact that the literary texts have persisted in exploring the consequences of women's initiative and free choice. The literary tradition seems somehow all too willing to set traps for an independent woman: from Medea to Desdemona, female characters were severely punished for any feeble attempt to put their lives in order. Whenever a heroine is given the opportunity to choose, the narrative concern of the plot forces her to take either the wrong path or the wrong man, due to all kinds of restraints society imposes on her, as shows the case of Isabel Archer in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. The novel belongs to the range of literary works that desperately try to prove that initiative, choice and action are not ubiquitous features of a female character, and it took a long time for the research of gender representations to dispute the fact that femininity must be associated with the qualities of submissive and passive, whereas masculinity stands for dominant and assertive. Thus the rise of gender studies brought a substantial change to the treatment of male and female characters, and the ways literary characters were represented became more closely connected to the changing priorities of literature and its altered role in a changing world.

Apart from rethinking women's problems and concerns in the recent past, postfeminist women's literature devotedly turns to a formal experiment: it uses playful narrative strategies such as appropriation of the plot, or «playgiarism», the practice invented by the icon of feminist metafiction, Kathy Acker. In her book *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini* (1983) Acker provides a fictional autobiography of the Italian filmmaker, appropriating his tragic fate for her specific artistic purposes. The enigma of Paso-

lini's reactivated the myth of the fallen artist, doomed to political and personal transgression, and Acker uses his artistic profile to tell her own story of marginality and bravery: in her book Pasolini himself tells the story of his life and death backwards, first solving his own murder and then retrospectively narrating his own life. Far less radical than in the case of Acker, appropriation is a continuous reediting and reinventing of the text, which revives the marginal and the hidden. According to Showalter, «women writers in the nineties also became interested in reimagining classic American literature from a female perspective,» (Showalter 2009: 502). While she, for unexplained reasons, refrains from discussing Acker's achievement in *The Jury of Her Peers* (there is not a single reference to Acker in the entire book), Showalter cites the lesser known example of Susan Sontag's *Alice in Bed* (1993), the play which brings together Henry James's sister Alice and Emily Dickinson in a surreal tea party, representing Alice James as a thwarted female genius. Showalter also calls attention to Sena Jeter Naslund's novel *Ahab's Wife* (1999), which is complementary to *Moby-Dick*, and a result of the author's desire to rewrite a specimen of the great American novel, which would have some important women characters in it.

Showalter also analyses the work of women writers who adopt minimalism, and Raymond Carver's intimate, economical and understated style of «less is more» to describe the female experience of the American dream. Often loosely defined as an aesthetic impulse towards reduction, minimalism in art and literature focuses on careful observation, and Ann Beattie is one of those American women writers who deeply immerse in the life of their characters, describing the anxieties of single women with the generous help from the tenets of minimalism. With their double standards, observed in the fact that they struggle against singledom yet recognise its advantages, Beattie's women anticipate the postfeminist ideology of the nineties, which also calls for a toned-down narrative technique, stripped off all the ornaments traditional realism would allow. Her style mimics the impassivity of her characters, which have passed from their naive idealism in

the 1960s and youthful anomie in the 1970s to the struggling with middle age in the first decade of the 21st century. In recent years, Beattie invested a considerable effort to make the transition from her early style of elliptical narratives free of authorial comment but filled with contemporary details and bright fragments of dialogue, to a more introspective and carefully plotted approach. The characters in her stories written during the eighties and nineties seem almost unable to communicate, too fragile and inarticulate to handle the duress they are exposed to. The endings of the stories used to be more tenuous and risky to the point of causing confusion. However, in spite of being spare and reductive, Beattie's stories were met with critical acclaim, unlike her novels, which failed to apply the reductive elements of minimalism, which were so effective in short narrative forms. Beattie's fictional concerns have remained constant over the years and the agents of her stories are often similar: either divorced or on their way to divorce, not quite sure of life or of themselves, sensitive and unable to be self-reliant. Relationships have always been central in Beattie's fiction, while all her stories scope remained tightly focused on the ordinary desperation of middle-class lives.

Unlike Raymond Carver, who dealt with the blue-collar workers from an imaginary Hopelessville and with their low-rent tragedies, Beattie focuses upon the New York white upper middle class and the rich people from the East Coast who cannot grasp happiness and harmony. Beattie's characters are marked with failure to reconcile the idealism of their youth with their present lifestyles, marked by disappointments and the ensuing listlessness. The ambivalence of the signals Beattie's fiction sends to the world is best seen in an episode from the novel *Falling in Place*: John, art director of a marketing company, is flipping through an artist's portfolio and wonders about one long black hair stretched across two sample layouts on top of the plastic. John asks his secretary for one of her long blond hairs and puts it where the other one has been, hoping that the rejected artist will notice the substitution and see it as a proof that editorial duties have been performed. Ann Beattie's fiction bases

its effects on such small changes of enormous importance. Readers may observe the small changes, and yet they may not; either they will grasp the meaning, or let it go.

Some of the best examples of narrative strategies in the service of unfolding the untold stories of women can be found in British literature. A fine example of the strategy of appropriation can be found in the first novel by mediaeval scholar Gloria Cigman, *A Wife there Was* (2007), based upon Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Cigman appropriates Chaucer's famous Wife of Bath with her distinctive qualities, picturing her to the tiniest detail: Alison is an unwanted daughter raised as a boy, rebellious and disobedient but also fragile and troubled with spiritual conflicts. The heroine's life story is furnished with details which could not have been embedded into the paratactic structure of *Canterbury Tales*. Gloria Cigman meticulously shows how the Wife of Bath uses the institutions of church, pilgrimage and marriage to channel her passionate temperament: her doctrine of marriage based on female supremacy is also presented in the novel as a reaction to the traditional view of marriage imposed by the church fathers and common law, but also as a strategy to cope with difficulties.

Cigman's Alison undermines patriarchal codes, embarks on numerous adventures using her religious faith as a cunning excuse, but she is less radical than Chaucer's heroine in her marital tactics. While Chaucer's Prologue simply reports how Alison reduces her husbands to submission and obedience, Cigman insists on a richer emotional scope, ranging from lust to grief, and from self-sacrifice to self-gratification. The Wife of Bath is well acquainted with Holy Scripture, and she deconstructs it in the greatest part of her prologue in Chaucer's book. She picks and chooses the quotations and episodes which support her way of thinking, and yet her skillful handling of the Bible in the comic debate on marriage shows that she is a knowledgeable woman. Religious issues bring up another interesting contrast between the Wife of Bath and her mighty opposite, the Prioress: while the Wife of Bath embodies empirical knowledge of facts, the Prioress embodies blind religious faith. The latter is a person

of limited mentality, credulous enough to accept naively a legend of a horrible murder of a child committed by Jews, and to recount it. No matter how cruel her story might seem, it is mostly an act of worship, and this devoutness and piety is something the worldly Wife of Bath is incapable of.

Unlike Cigman's novel, *Canterbury Tales* offer no detailed plot for the characters to act in, so they narrate their respective stories and indulge in the ultimate act of inventing a new fictional world for their listeners. Since their only acts are speech acts, we cannot perceive any development or change in their nature, which is partly due to the fact that the concept of a developing character is not a common type of characterisation in the literature of Chaucer's time. The personal traits of the pilgrims do not undergo any progressive or temporal change, and we end up with a gallery of frozen, yet telling portraits. Nevertheless, although the portrait cannot indicate a change in mood or the flow of thought, it can still be rich in detail and very vivid, and it can inspire a whole new literary work, based on the same characters.

The idea that all history is fiction leads to a new interest in fiction as history; postmodernists have a particular interest in adopting new, marginal perspectives on events, decentering recorded history. Historical fiction written by women is part of the wider project, pioneered by second wave feminism and later supported by postfeminism, of rewriting history from a female perspective, and recovering the lives of women who have been excluded or marginalised (King 2005: 3-4). Another creative interpretation of history and the status of women in the social context is offered in the novels by Sarah Waters, who has dealt with lesbian characters positioned in the Victorian age as in her first three novels unofficially marked as «the Victorian trilogy». Lesbians have a special affinity with historical fiction, and Sarah Waters's novels like *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* make it possible to explore what lesbian lives may have been like, in the absence of historical evidence (King 2005: 4). What connects the three novels is the setting, the last three decades of the 19th century, the Late Victorian England, and the attempt at unveiling the marginalised versions of the history of the period.

Sarah Waters's recreation of a distant epoch has been urged by writing lesbians into the history of urban life and its various subcultures. In her novels, lesbian characters have been associated to the image of a "New Woman", women who are prisoners, outlaws, murderers, rebels and even lunatics, since the lesbians are quite often characterised and linked to criminal behaviour across various genres (Millbank 2004: 156). While *Tipping the Velvet* tackles the issues of theatre, prostitution and Suffragette struggle alike, *Affinity* follows the prison life of a she-felon who is a medium and a fraud; *Fingersmith* offers an insight into baby factories and the slum districts of London. Every character is in a lesbian relationship, which is not merely physical, but also contains elements of psychological growth, as the characters are marked with a constant search for purpose and goal. Waters presented homosexuality in her novels to prove that it coexists with all kinds of character structure and personality, and in all classes, picturing it either as a particular way to grow and mature or as a field of emotional manipulation.

The title of Waters's first novel *Tipping the Velvet* uses a cryptic jargon for physical intimacy in order to show that every period in history has its subterranean ethics of living, its hidden agendas and invisible styles and fashions. Her main heroine Nancy Astley, a young woman in the late 1880s who develops a passionate crush on another young woman, constructs her own lesbian identity owing to the twilight demimonde of late 19th century London, and the city plays a crucial role in this hybrid narrative of complicity and critique of Victorian society.

The view of London, and the metropolis in general, as an acting board and a visual show was rather common in the early nineteenth century: «We see in the 1820s a society that regarded the metropolis as a stage on which to perform and witness its own civility, grandeur, and ebullience. The image of theatre is crucial to urban representation in the early nineteenth century, for it suggests not only entertainment and performance but also a relationship of distance and tentativeness between spectator and the action on the stage. The urban spectator of this period, wheth-

er writer or imagined subject, experienced the sights and people of the streets as passing shows or as monuments to be glimpsed briefly or from afar. This distance helped to obscure and control all that was seen, however arresting or unsettling, and it helped, too, to ensure that whatever did unsettle the spectator would not be understood as a symptom of some larger social disturbance.» (Epstein Nord 1995:20).

Meeting the late nineteenth century London and its artists, perverts, lesbians and socialists, Nancy creates her own creed. First of all, she has to win her territory: by the end of the nineteenth century, the streets of London had become accessible to women, in their role of charity workers, with a degree of freedom that previously had only been unquestionably granted to prostitutes. Nancy's evolution towards self-discovery and fulfilment runs parallel to her physical and metaphorical «journey against the current» towards and within the metropolis: from Whitstable to London and from the glittering West End theatres to the East End slums. On her journey of self-discovery, Nancy interacts with different social classes and experiments with dramatically different lifestyles, using the city as her stage, obliterating the gender boundaries and bridging the gap between her authentic and stage identity.

The analysis of fictional works dating from a variety of epochs and literary contexts points out that it is not only that women authors share creeds and beliefs, but that their characters have something in common as well. Victorian or post-modern, traditional or experimental, characters in the literary works we have tackled in this paper do establish a genuine female paradigm of traits, which reveals that readiness to act upon their own initiative, choice and action connects them all.

What characterised recent historical fiction is its more direct engagement with historical process, often blending historical documentation and events with its imagined narratives and characters. This characteristic relates new historical fiction to postmodern trends in historiography itself. Even historians have to rely on someone's narrative, oral or documentary, therefore, post-modernists argue that history can only be con-

tested versions of the past. An imaginative construction of life of which little is known may have its own claim to a kind of truth.

“Pa used to say that any piece of history might be made into a tale: it was only a question of deciding where the tale began, and where it ended” (Waters 1999: 7). This sentence from the novel *Affinity* can serve both Elaine Showalter's purpose of mapping out the territories of women's writing, and the ambition of Sarah Waters, Gloria Cigman and Ann Beattie to tread new ways of reading women's texts, as well as writing women's texts into the Anglophone literary history.

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КОНСТРУКЦИЈА РОДНИХ УЛОГА У КЊИЖЕВНОСТИ И КУЛТУРИ: ПРИМЕР ИЛЕЈН ШОВОЛТЕР И АНГЛОФОНЕ ЛИТЕРАТУРЕ

Резиме

Три деценије након успостављања термина гинокритика, америчка теоретичарка Илејн Шоволтер развија своју тезу да се женско стваралаштво не може истраживати без разумевања женског искуства, али овај пут чини то у књизи Суд њој једнаких, која представља преглед три и по века америчке женске књижевности. Шоволтерова деведесете године прошлог века сматра прекретницом у женској књижевној историји, одлучујућим тренутком кад је престала потреба да жене доказују своје место у канону. Рад се бави и постфеминистичким стратегијама књижевног текста које јасно експлицирају промене у статусу женског ауторства, наводећи као примере ауторке из англофоне књижевне традиције, од Шарлоте Перкинс Гилман преко Ен Бити до Саре Вотерс и Глорије Цигман.

vladysg@yahoo.com