

ABOUT WOMEN, GENDER AND LITERATURE: AN INTERVIEW WITH JANET TODD

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During the annual AEDEAN conference held in Valladolid during the week of December 14th-20th, 1992, Professor Janet Todd was so kind as to grant us an interview. The text printed here is the result of that conversation.

MATILDE MARTIN: In *Gender and Literary Voice*, a volume edited by you in 1980, you started by asking if there was a distinctive female tone or style in the literature written by women. Then you argued that no definitive answer was possible or even desirable. Have you changed your original position? What is your opinion regarding this same matter after more than a decade of new research in feminist literary criticism?

JANET TODD: I think it remains an impossible question. At different times there is, or the culture thinks there is, a way that women write or a way that men write. At other times this seems an essentialist position to hold. In the last decade there has been such a stress on the constructed nature of everything, the constructed nature of discourse for example, that feminism is caught up in the excitement, and so we are all now talking about discursive positions, aren't we?, and taking on subjects or subjecthood. And so I think that it would be harder now to say that there's definitely a feminine sentence or whatever, than it was in the 1970s. When I edited *Gender and Literary Voice* I was working on Mary Wollstonecraft quite heavily and she, after a whole century in England of extremely gendered writing, when it was quite clear that women were meant to write in a different way and with a different content from the way that men wrote and the content that they used, insisted that there was no difference between male and female writing –although people like Mary Poovey and other writers on Mary Wollstonecraft suggest that she implied otherwise and that she herself, in fact, took on a *masculine* style quite clearly and that led to all kinds of discursive, rhetorical and psychological problems. But now I'm working much more on a much earlier writer, Aphra Behn, who wrote before this gendered notion –or before the *rigorous* sense of the gendered notion– had occurred in English. And the fact that she is working right at the beginning of women's entry *en masse* into writing and that there are no real precedents for a professional woman writer, suggests to me now that you simply can't even ask, let alone

answer that question. In a way Behn had the opportunities of content and the opportunities of style of any man writing in her time, and she insisted on this freedom. The very fact that I'm trying to work out what she wrote and that one cannot definitively say what she or, for example, the earl of Rochester authored, indicates to me now that you simply can't label writing according to the sex of the author. There are people who say, well, often Behn sounds like a woman in some of her plays: she has upfronted the female gaze or something like that. But what's also interesting is that she refuses the public-private distinction, which becomes so important for women's writing later and which relegates women to the domestic and emotional spheres. Behn has very definitely a public voice: she feels that she can write on state occasions and make political comments in a way that really women for another hundred and fifty years did not entirely feel comfortable in doing. Nearly a hundred years later, Fanny Burney had to go through all sort of elaborate excuses to explain why she was writing on a political subject like the French Revolution. And yet Aphra Behn simply wrote about state politics the whole time.

MM: So today it's even harder.

JT: I think it's even harder. I think the 1970s was an interesting sort of time for me because being in America then, and in the American tradition of feminist criticism, I felt all the excitement about French feminism which was impacting on the States or had been impacting for some time. And it's French feminism that insisted on "feminine writing" and on making stylistic statements of gender. There was a certain excitement about all that and a muddling of theory and empirical observation which made us translate French theory into real stylistic practice. But later we settled down to a kind of pluralism.

MM: In the introduction to your *Feminist Literary History* you stated that "in the late 1980s women often come into feminist criticism without the apprenticeship or context of active feminism; they may enter it having already established security of tenure through other work or they may arrive through theory rather than protest, through psychoanalysis and deconstruction rather than demonstrations. They may use the distinguishing term 'intellectual'—a term hardly heard in the early 1970s—to describe themselves and their separation from other women". My question is about the original connection between the early American feminist socio-political activity and the great output of feminist theory and criticism; do you think they have to go necessarily together lest we become too elitist and detached from reality? Do you think the original emphasis on the "personal" must be abandoned?

JT: I don't think one can be dictatorial about it. I don't think one can say "must" to anything. I think that one can just look at the past and say what has happened, and some of us obviously have become elitist. New Historicism with its elaborate jargon and its very complicated philosophical underpinnings ensures that any kind of feminist program in that style will certainly be elitist. It is not open to anybody to come up the street and understand what's going on or to wish to do so. So to that extent feminist criticism has clearly become elitist. But one might argue, too, that there's not a lot of feminist protest going on outside the Academy, that there's a kind of dampening down and a reeling backwards in many ways, to the extent that the media says we are in post-feminism—which seems to me a little premature. To an extent it may be that the Academy is keeping going. You know, perhaps this is where it now exists, and it has inevitably become an elitist thing. Perhaps the newer emphasis on gender rather than women's writing is a way to hold on to feminism as

well. It's very difficult to say where society is going, but this stress on both postmodernism and postfeminism seems to indicate that that stage of early straight-forward feminist protest –which was perhaps under-theorized– is a thing of the past. There are of course still struggles but, apart from something large like the abortion issue in the American election, there's a sense amongst the younger people of active feminism being rather old-fashioned and instead there's a newer “movement” of postmodernist play and power, the sort of Madonna thing where you take on sexist attitudes and roles. This sort of thing is supposed to be ironized, and to be done with a certain playfulness and then it's in a way O.K. Along with all the emphasis not so much on sixties sexuality, but on sexualities with their special discourses like sado-masochism in gay writing, this movement is taking the place of the early feminism. In a way I suppose it opens things up and perhaps this is where things have to go. We will have to wait and see. I think it's all quite complicated at the moment, and some of us who are older, like me, have a kind of old-fashioned desire to hold on to an earlier activism, as though it had a sort of heroic status. But that is really romanticizing, undoubtedly so. Perhaps we occasionally yearn for the clarity of a time when you could simply get up and say you wanted equal rights or equal pay or whatever. But in fact the problem is that a lot of these apparently simple issues are not really over at all. I mean, how many women are in positions of influence? And even if one wishes to collude with the whole system and become simply co-opted, one has only infiltrated male institutions –and we still haven't done that very well. So we have a long way to go before women are in the positions of power in male institutions and further before they change those institutions. So far, women don't really have the choice of careers with families. And what about the older woman? the biggest single group that is now discriminated against, it seems to me. This writing-out of culture and out of jobs of the middle-aged woman is extraordinary. I think Germaine Greer talks about that a bit in *The Change* but it hasn't really been addressed by the culture. So there's a lot more to be done.

MM: That reminds me of a book by Lillian S. Robinson, *Sex, Class and Culture* (1978), where she argues that the establishment of feminist discourse might lead to cooperation with the very system it tried to attack or subvert. Do you believe this establishment is real or just a dubious notion into which we are being led up to?

JT: I think it is real and that we have colluded with it and have to do so. I remember in the early stage of feminism there was an excitement about finding your own Academy outside universities. You'd do your own thing, you would not have the hierarchies of the male institutions. I remember when I had a feminist journal very early on, we were not going to referee articles in the way that men did. We were not going to write with the kind of logical hegemonic sort of writing that male papers were written in. And yet, you know, that's like saying that the language is patriarchal and hierarchical in the way that many feminists did say. Though this is certainly true, what are we going to do?, get rid of the language? Collusion is happening at every level in every sentence, in every place, and all you need, all one can do is be as aware of it as possible. If it is colluding with the patriarchal world it's indubitable and inevitable.

MM: In connection with that you have said in one of your works that “feminist criticism hasn't concluded yet even the simplest reformist work in institutions”. Despite that, do you think we have arrived to a moment in which the feminist critical discourse has been already performed and that from now on it will be

just one of the many critical discourses possible, lacking therefore the original challenging strength?

JT: I don't think it has achieved this much. I think it would be hard to find a job in a university department in England without using some of the New Historical-Feminist jargon. But this does not indicate a radical change. Indeed it has even helped the shift from a concern for women writers, who have been inadequately investigated now, to a concern for gender. In a way "gender" is more exciting because it opens up all writings and culture and starts to destabilize all our structures. At the same time, it's something that can be assimilated more easily into criticism in general, and it is quite possible that, at the end of all this excitement, women writers will be back marginalized and ghettoized in the way they were before. So I feel an odd, and slightly, ambiguous relationship to the shift from women's studies to gender studies. The New Historical emphasis is also tied up with another thing which makes some of the older feminists appear curiously old-fashioned, and that is the aesthetic, some sort of notion of value, of certain writers being judged more valuable than others. It seems sometimes to be a necessary feminist position to say that the cookery book of Hannah Wooley has as much value/interest as the works of Milton. Historical feminism has to doubt whether there is any history at all, whether there are any facts, or whether everything is simple discourse; therefore, everything written has equal relevance and, since you can only see from the now, you can have no real historical or aesthetic perspective. We're simply always within our own subjecthood, in the present. Now feminism has got caught up with all this theory and it has become sort of old-fashioned to say, "oh, but look, here's Aphra Behn, why don't we bring her into the canon of male literature?", or state that one is reading her writing because she appears better than other people of that period. Women of my generation working on women writers are, in a way, put into a position of rather being like dinosaurs. We're a bit embarrassing to the present; we are somewhat mocked by the old canonical critics who say "who are these people? who is Behn or Wollstonecraft? or anybody else upstart and female?" So, we are not easily assimilated in to the great male institutions, who still predominate when all is said and done. But neither are we entirely acceptable to the New Historicist, more fashionable world which sees us making an effort to canonize a few writers, not change the culture. So I think we're in an awkward position. Our answer, of course, would be that the new enterprise is in fact more elitist than what we were doing and that the gap now between the ordinary reader and the few students who've studied enough to understand the new academic language is growing every greater. We took our initial stand on breaking down the distinction between the outside world and the Academy. So, in a way things have gone backwards. Which is what I meant when ages ago I talked about that word "intellectual", which we could never ever have used to refer to ourselves.

MM: Can you offer any explanation for the fact that feminist scholarship and theory are much more powerful in the States than in Britain? For instance, some of your first books, *Women's Friendship in Literature* (1980) and *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1660-1800* were very well-received in America but not in Britain. Do you think we have to look for the responsibility in the traditional socialist ideology of British feminism and, therefore, its lack of an independent identity?

JT: I think that the strength of the American movement was that it was catholic, in that sense of allowing everybody into it; I think that was a great strength. But you

could also say it was its weakness. It was untheorized, which is why it fell before French theory so thoroughly; it was overwhelmed by French theory because it did not talk about itself in any really self-conscious way and it lacked the traditions and the vocabulary of English Socialist or Marxist kind of writing. In a sense one defines oneself by what one is opposing; the British tradition was opposing the class Leavisism and New Criticism and so on, and as a result it spent its time in fairly generalized statements about writing and Literature and it didn't have much concern for the individual woman writers or for the archeological work on them such as the Americans undertook. Another is that the Americans had a great deal more money, more grants, more publishing outlets, more opportunities to do the kind of work that takes an awful lot of time to get going. You know, it takes a long time to start researching on somebody who is pretty unknown, editing, digging, doing all that spade work. It's more possible in the States than it was in England. So, there were inevitably more scholars in America writing and reading the kind of work I was doing.

MM: What is your position regarding the design of literary anthologies? Is it possible to create one that is not informed of any ideological content and responsive to almost all stances and periods?

JT: I think I would never do another anthology. It was interesting this morning when Edna Longley was talking about the difficulty of Northern-Irish anthologies. I walked into the same thing, for the Irish problem is absolute. I was doing an anthology of British women writers, so Northern Ireland as part of the British Isles had to be included, I thought. So I included one or two writers who wrote me outraged letters about it. I then had the *Irish Times* ringing me up and I said something unguarded on the telephone, which was then put in the newspaper, that Ms. Todd thinks that so and so is an "English" writer, which is not the way I put it; I had said an English-language-writer. Then there was the problem of who should be in the book, of people saying they had been missed out and asking why. Some blame you for being not feminist enough, while others see a feminist endeavour as ludicrous or pointless. You can't win, in the end. With any anthology I think it's very hard to have principles; in fact you have to be pragmatic, but then afterwards you are forced to defend your pragmatic decisions as if they were principled. As for content I think it is so necessary to be politically correct and representative now that the only acceptable way is to show knowledge of one's limitations as editor and not ever to claim representativeness.

MM: I suppose it is a question of time as well.

JT: Yes, it is, but even when you intend to stop or leave something out, you are blamed. What you leave out is all that reviewers notice. I edited a dictionary which I think is the most important one I've done –of *British and American Women Writers 1660-1800*– the first real effort in modern times to bring into the fore 17th and 18th century women writers. I said very clearly that I was stopping with the first absolutely indubitably major woman writer in the great male Leavisite tradition, Jane Austen. Then the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewed it and said, "my God, isn't this ridiculous, a book without Jane Austen". So, whatever you say, whatever you anthologize, HOWEVER you do it, you simply offend. So I think I'm probably done with such works.

MM: From the 1980s onwards several male critics have been taking up the question of feminist literary theory. Some, as the Australian critic K.K. Ruthven, have adopted a rather paternal attitude and come to "rescue" feminist theory from

the impending danger of becoming minimized and erroneously treated by female critics; others, undoubtedly influenced by the new increase of gay studies, have developed serious inquiries into questions about male creativity and even about the very concept of “masculinity” in literary texts. What is your position regarding this issue? Can feminist discourse profit from this type of research undertaken by male critics?

JT: I think that feminist criticism can profit by anything. I would hope so, and I think that gay studies have made enormous strides in the last few years. Indeed it seems to be the cutting-edge of criticism at the moment. It has really taught us a sense of how much the “other” is expressed in gendered terms, or, rather, ambiguously gendered terms. It’s all very exciting. The problem, when there is one is down to personalities. There is a way in which men, with all their still huge institutional and psychological advantages can very easily appropriate anything and one shouldn’t underestimate their ability simply to use everything as grist to an ambitious mill. But I think many different people working on something is good, the more people are brought in the better. And I think there has always been a danger of marginalizing feminist criticism and women’s studies into special courses and leaving the Romantic poets, for example, sitting centrally where they always were. So if men can come into it, they may realize that they can change their own teaching and change their own thinking. I think that would be splendid. I doubt that they could do that without, in a sense, arrogating some of the significance to themselves. I think it was Elaine Showalter who talked about Terry Eagleton coming in and showing the girls how to do it. There’s often an element of this. It’s even easier now that there’s a lot of jargon of feminist criticism. It’s easy to learn this and manipulate it, and really not feel that anything in your behaviour or your politics has changed because of it. But men considering masculinity, if they do it modestly, must be good.

MM: Since its beginning the majority of feminist literary research has been focused mainly on fiction and narrative. Whereas female poetical production hasn’t received the same attention, although there are at the moment several prominent feminist critics in America dealing with poetry, for instance Alicia Ostriker, Mary K. DeShazer or Diane Wood Middlebrook. Can you offer any explanation for this? Do you think it is owing to the hard access that poetry has always implied, or rather to the difficulties in finding an empirical reality behind poetry that hinders a wider apprehension of poetical motives and so on?

JT: I would have thought that women poetry writers were very present at the moment, though I noticed in the talk in Edna Longley this morning that there was only one woman at the very end, with only one short poem. So this is a woman assessing Northern-Irish poetry and she seems to hear hardly any women’s voices at all. In the past there were a lot of women poets—in the 17th. and 18th. centuries for example. Later their absence has a lot to do with the institutionalizing of literature at the moment of Romanticism. There are not “Romantic” women poets with a capital R, you know; the pose of the heroic transcendental poet is not, on the whole, a female one. So I think that what they were doing, describing the everyday or—and this is unexpected—the political, has been downgraded. So you get a line of great heroic male poets who insist on writing in a certain way and this became the hegemonic poetry; the line of Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning and the Modernist poets, Yeats and Eliot. This sort of great tradition doesn’t much feature women. I think that the extraordinary valorizing of this tradition, of tran-

scendental mystifying or mystical –depending on one’s view point– poetry was not on the whole associated with women. Sentimental poetry of the 18th. and 19th. centuries, of the sort women wrote, is even now of little critical interest. Also poetry of a certain sort always had more status than fiction, with which women were most associated, and men tend to be in the areas of high endeavour and achievement while women tend to be in those of lower.

MM: In an interview granted by Elaine Showalter in 1990 she talked about the French feminist psychoanalytical writers (Cixous, Irigaray, etc) and said that “French feminist theory changed the way we all looked at writing and reality. That was an astonishing contribution, but nothing is happening there any more. All the feminist journals in France have stopped being published. One doesn’t hear much about French women writers experimenting in these modes”. Do you agree with her? What is the present situation regarding the two basic modes of literary criticism, the socio-historical American version and the psychoanalytical French trend?

JT: I do not really know where the French are going now. They always said they were not feminists from the start. So you can hardly state that they should carry on in a feminist direction. In a sense they turned inwards into a kind of privatized writing. So I presume that they are going on in their private and privatized way, but I actually don’t know. Presumably because my own interests have moved backwards in time so thoroughly, I’ve not kept up with theory as I ought since I find it more relevant to present than to past writing. What has certainly happened is that Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva have become a kind of “great three”, a trinitarian group in which one must believe, and often I fear that they are taught in Britain in place of the full range and richness of women’s literature. Since they have achieved this sort of huge status I would imagine it’s pretty hard to follow them or for them to surpass themselves. I always found the psychoanalytical critics quite exciting to read. I never found that they were of much relevance to my understanding of literature, but they were fun to read in their own right. I don’t like psychoanalysis as a system and an institution or as a dominant discourse. It always seems indelibly patriarchal however you modify it or play around it, as Jane Gallop and Jacqueline Rose do, –people whom I much admire. It still remains to me basically an extraordinary constructed system that we would do best to historicize and escape from.

MM: And, besides, they never analysed literature.

JT: No. In fact several of the French psychoanalytical theorists said that it was not worth reading pre-Modernist literature. In a sense they only accepted themselves as correct and worthwhile because they were the beginning. As they recede into history –or their moment does– it becomes, I think, very comic that they took that attitude, as well as their monstrous elitism that made them think that they and French culture were so remarkably superior that they would leaven the world. But, having said that, it’s quite clear that my younger colleagues have resurrected what we once regarded as essentialist writings, and are doing something quite interesting and new with it. I certainly don’t agree with it, but it’s quite clear that they are finding in this work a kind of new complexity; for them it is enabling in a way that it hasn’t been for me. Also they were not on the receiving end of Kristeva’s scorn for us Anglos and Americans in the 1970s.

MM: Accepting American socio-historical feminist criticism as the dominant mode in the 1970s and its coexistence with the French psychoanalytical “feminist” school in the 1980s, can you think of any stance having the possibility of becoming

more predominant than these two in the 1990s. In other words, which do you think will be the most relevant tendency in the next decade?; in which direction or directions is feminist criticism going?

JT: I don't know where any criticism is going. I really think at the moment that the whole assault on the literary is perhaps the most crucial area of debate. Part of me values Literature above any cultural activity. But part of me thinks, yes, the whole construct of literary criticism which has substituted literary exegesis for biblical exegesis is peculiar, as is the notion of a transcendental aesthetic. Maybe it was a huge European male plot. Perhaps the whole thing should be deconstructed and we should look at culture generally, whether it's the media or books. Feminism is inevitably involved and implicated in this debate. So inevitably I feel divided. Or rather, after a lifetime of being unacceptably radical I find myself in a rather bizarre conservative position. When I was in Cambridge, a very traditional university, I would agitate for more women writers, and more Third World writing, as well as the inclusion of non-elitist discourse and the media. But now that I'm at another university which has a more liberal tradition and is more open to change, I feel uncomfortable at having students who've never read Dryden and Milton. If you want to deconstruct writers in a feminist way, they have to have been built up first and endowed with some absolute value. I think it is very difficult to know what is going to happen to criticism over the next few years. I worry about letting go of the old rational-humanist-liberal basis of literature, of which, I hope, feminism in one manifestation is a constituent part, and of helping along what I see as an anti-intellectual assault by many governments. Once you lose a firm basis I believe that a reactionary government can make inroads into institutions, and quickly assert that there's no value in what you are doing at all. But if one can't say where things are going, one can hazard a guess that we are all going together, that, with so much easy communication we all affect each other. The assault on literature and liberal feminism is widespread, but so can the response be.