DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 101 362 CS 201 821

AUTHOR Rogers, Katharine M.
TITLE The Antifeminist Bias in Traditional Criticism.
PUB DATE Nov 74
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (64th, New Orleans, Louisiana, November 28-30, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Characterization (Literature); *Feminism; *Literary Criticism; *Sex Discrimination; *Sex Stereotypes

ABSTRACT

Ten recent articles and books are cited in this paper as examples of a continuing antifeminist bias in literary criticism. Several forms of this bias are discussed, including an imperviousness to the feminist awareness, a refusal to recognize it, and open irritation by some critics that women are now finding a voice in literary criticism. A reviewer in the "Times Literary Supplement" is quoted as stating that an otherwise admirable book on 18th century culture includes "a (nowadays mandatory) glimpse at the status of women." A critic of "Joseph Andrews" is quoted as saying that Lady Booby shows "feminine irrationality," but the same critic does not characterize Parson Trulliber's similar irrationality as masculine. It is concluded that antifeminist bias in criticism is still widespread. (TS)

Katharine M. Rogers

THE ANTIFEMINIST BIAS IN TRADITIONAL CRITICISM

Critical scholarship produced by reputable academics continues to be distressingly impervious to the new feminist awareness. Supposedly objective criticism frequently reveals disparagement of women -- in words used or casual asides -- a disposition to ignore feminist issues even when they are central in a work, and the bland assumption that this is a male-centered universe. Unfortunately it is easy to demonstrate this perseveration by citing examples, none more than ten years old, from the most respectable academic sources.

Some writers openly express irritation that women are now finding a voice in literary criticism. A reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement sniffs that an otherwise admirable book on 18th century culture includes "A (nowadays mandatory) glimpse at the status of women."[1] Evidently he deplores the necessity of including such a trivial subject among more important ones like beaux and travel conditions. A reviewer of Elizabeth Hardwick's Seduction and Betrayal not only denies all her evidence that women writers have suffered from social oppression, but takes time out to praise her for refraining from "the shrill, sanctimonious keening that is the normal accompaniment of feminist declarations."[2]

More often, feminist awareness has simply not penetrated to the academic critic. He or she slips into apparently objective discussions words or casual generalizations which reveal antifeminist assumptions or patronage of women. A critic of Joseph Andrews tells us that Lady Booby shows "feminine irrationality," but does not characterize Parson Trulliber's similar irrationality as masculine.[3] Another man explains the appeal of Evelina by saying that "Like most women, 18th century women

loved to dream."[4] A book on women novelists describes two of the subjects as "literary spinsters," besides constantly referring to them by their first names. It glibly characterizes the Regency as a period of "female domination" but not of "a feminine spirit," as if the meanings of these terms were self-evident,[5] when in fact they are clear only in terms of sexist stereotypes.[5]

Sometimes the bias against feminism appears negatively in a bland refusal to recognize it. If an author presents a case for women's rights, his or her arguments are forced into an esthetic context or dissolved into meaningless generalizations. The implication is that no major author would concern himself with so trivial a subject. One critic of Jane Eyre assures us that the book is untainted by feminism: "The famous plea that women ought not to be confined 'to making puddings and knitting stockings' is not propaganda for equal employment but for a recognition of woman's emotional nature"; and its object is not the self-development of women but the prevention of their turning into selfish Blanche Ingrams who do nothing for men.[6]

Ibsen criticism is particularly rich in misreadings of this nature by critics who refuse to recognize radical feminism in an author they respect. His latest biographer assures us that "A Doll's House is no more about women's rights than Shakespeare's Richard II is about the divine right of kings"; its theme is individual self-fulfillment, unrelated to sexual identity.[7] While feminism in an author is usually defused by denial that it is there, antifeminism tends to be reported faithfully, and without qualifying comment. Most books on D. H. Lawrence blandly detail his most appalling sexist views without any indication that these are not wise and humane.

The two works with which I shall conclude, [redacted] show an insensitivity to feminist awareness which may fairly be described as resolute. Both authors assume that the male viewpoint is the only viewpoint, and proceed from there to judge women. Discussing Shakespeare's Winter's Tale, Thomas McFarland feels the need to find a reason for Leontes' sudden jealous fury at his wife, and has no trouble finding what he seeks. While an "industrious and mechanical scholar, sitting comfortably in his study," might explain Leontes' unmotivated behavior in terms of dramatic convention, the truly experienced male knows that "the probabilities in such situations all too often support the fact of guilt." McFarland backs this astonishing assertion by a newspaper article which estimated that 60% of American husbands and 40% of American wives are unfaithful. That these statistics point to more male than female infidelity, that the moral implications of adultery are not what they were in Shakespeare's time, that Hermione is obviously chaste whatever the statistics on other women may be, do not disturb McFarland. He also justifies Othello's murder of Desdemona on the grounds that, although the suspicions of Desdemona did happen to be wrong, "they derive power from the high probability of a young wife's betrayal." McFarland seems to find it difficult to distinguish between one woman and another.

The same insulting reductive assumption that women are all about the same permeates Hugh Richmond's Shakespeare's Sexual Comedy: A Mirror for Lovers; this book aims to prove that Shakespeare's pictures of sexual relationships, interpreted as illiberally as possible, should serve as literal guides today. Shakespeare's main lesson, he says, is that true, lasting, mature love comes from recognition and acceptance of

the loved one's imperfections. Sensible enough, but since the book is relentlessly confined to the man's point of view, what emerges is considerable emphasis on the imperfections of women. Hence it drives home the lesson that "A mistress or a wife becomes someone you love not because of her virtue but in spite of her faults." Touchstone's description of Audrey -- "a poor ... ill-favoured thing ... but mine own" -- is actually presented as a pattern for a man's attitude toward the woman he is going to marry.

Predictably, Richmond's favorite comedy is The Taming of the Shrew, in which crude farce he sees a wise and subtle presentation of the love relationship. Petruchio's taming of Kathraina is an enlightened educational program; her final abject speech of submission is a recognition of reality.

Richmond emphasizes Katharina's intellectual gifts, an emphasis which seems odd until we see the applications he will make. He finds modern counterparts for her in unmarried women intellectuals, whom he warns to take to heart the improvement produced in Katharina by her taming. He proceeds to lump together all able, forceful women as neurotic shrews -- whether they are Shakespearean characters (Lady Macbeth or Cleopatra), historical rulers or leaders (Cleopatra, Joan of Arc, or Queen Elizabeth), or -- coming closer to modern relevance -- unmarried and successful professional women, who are "by nature" rigid, egotistical, and domineering. "Many distinguished women in the academic profession are far more exacting than a top sergeant at his most overpowering ... women in authority are all too often relentless to others in their profession, yet savagely intolerant of criticism of their own performance

by anyone else." Finally Richmond's thesis carries him into total absurdity, when he claims that Shakespeare's Cleopatra, not only a mistress and mother but one of the most sexually fascinating women in history, "carries an affectation of virility ... to a sustained rejection of her biological role."[9] By this time the connection between male-oriented criticism and outright misogyny has become clear. From analysis of Shakespeare's comedies in oblivious disregard of what women think about them, Richmond has proceeded to direct attack on women who do not fit into the limited role he would prescribe for them.

Now what is disturbing here is not the absurdities of Richmond's argument, but the authority with which he speaks. This book appears to be appreciative criticism of Shakespeare; its tone seems rational and objective, however ludicrous the content. Moreover, its author is a Professor at Berkeley: he holds a position which commands respect, his book will be read by future teachers in graduate schools, he himself teaches generations of students. It is dispiriting to realize that young males are still being taught that love is degrading and women full of faults, and young females that they must avoid forcefulness and intellectuality lest they become "unfeminine" or even turn into unmarried professional women.

NOTES

1. Claude Rawson, review of The Augustan Vision, TLS (4 Oct. 1974), p. 1081.

2. John Aldridge, Commentary, LVIII (August, 1974), 75-78.

3. Homer Goldberg, The Art of "Joseph Andrews" (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

4. Michael Adelstein, Fanny Burney (New York: Twayne, 1968), p. 38.

5. Vineta Colby, Yesterday's Woman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 48, 210.

6. Robert B. Martin, Charlotte Bronte's Novels (New York: Norton, 1966), pp. 93-94.

7. Michael Meyer, Ibsen: A Biography (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), p. 457.

8. Thomas McFarland, Shakespeare's Pastoral Comedy (University of North Carolina Press, 1972), pp. 126-27.

9. Hugh Richmond, Shakespeare's Sexual Comedy: A Mirror for Lovers (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), pp. 47, 63, 83-85, 167.