

**DISPLACING HISPLACEMENT:
AN INTERVIEW WITH ELAINE SHOWALTER**

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During the week of March 8th-12th, 1990, an international conference was held in Alicante which brought together a number of prominent literary critics, sociologists and philosophers of the caliber of Michel Maffesoli (Sorbona), John Turner (Livelyhood Award), Luce Irigaray (Paris), etc. Among these, one of the names which generated the most interest was Elaine Showalter, who gave a lecture on “Hysteria, Feminism and Women’s Language”. She was kind enough to grant us an interview and the text printed here is the result of that conversation.

Question: How did you become interested in feminist criticism? Was it through political commitment or more through your academic work?

Answer: It was more for political reasons. I started while I was in graduate school in California—this was in the early 1960s. I wanted to do a dissertation on a woman writer, partly because I went to a women’s college—Bryn Mawr College, in Pennsylvania—which turned out to be very formative for me. It’s one of the oldest women’s colleges in the States, it was founded by feminists and it’s still the only women’s college in the US that has a Ph.D. so it had a long tradition in women’s education. When I was there, however, the feminist tradition had eroded, and we were left with the worst of two women’s worlds: a restrictive social environment, and a very cerebral and detached intellectual system, modelled on nineteenth-century British universities. No one ever spoke about women. In addition, I shared with many other women of my generation a feeling of dissatisfaction with the feminine role: my mother for example had been desperately unhappy. Even at university I didn’t know any adult women whose lives seemed exciting and full. I had read about such women, but never met one.

Q.: So you had no models...

A.: Well, no, except writers but they seemed too far away. I could never find a woman whom I could take as my model, not even my own professors, who were from another generation, and who were unmarried rotaries of the mind. It didn't seem to me that there was very much scholarly background on English women writers, so I started doing research when I was at graduate school. That was quite difficult because unfortunately there were no theoretical points of departure. When my husband was offered a job at Princeton we moved from California to New Jersey and therefore I had to find a job teaching. The two universities there, Princeton and Rutgers, did not hire women in 1965, so it was very discouraging. I didn't know if I would ever be able to teach, so the motivation to finish my dissertation declined for a while. I took a job working for the Educational Testing Service, an institute that writes entrance examinations for the universities. I hated it because it was all mathematics and statistics, at which I am terrible. Then, I was offered a job at Douglass College, the women's college of Rutgers. By that time I read in the newspaper that a women's liberation group was going to be formed in the town, and they were going to have a meeting. I went immediately, even though I didn't know exactly what it was going to be about. And that is how I got involved in the women's movement in the USA.

Almost from the beginning I was very active in groups, in politics and in all kinds of demonstrations, which was quite difficult because of my private situation: by that time, I had a baby and later I was pregnant with a second child. On top of that, I was living in Princeton and most of the activities were in New York. I think it was amazing that I was able to do so much. I suppose I did it because I felt so strongly about it. Within the movement, I felt that there were women who would be interested in my research on women writers and when I told them they encouraged me to go on. It was in the contexts of the women's movement that I first began to do original work, and to have the stamina to complete my degree. My colleagues at Douglass were also a great source of ideas and support.

Q.: Your anthology *The New Feminist Criticism* was primarily concerned with presenting what Annette Kolodny would call "a playful pluralism". However some critics complained that a number of theoretical practices had been left out, that the book was not responsive to the variety of positions engaged in feminist critical debate.

A.: Well, I wanted that book to be bigger. In fact, there were originally many more writers and a wider range of positions, but the publishers didn't really want to publish the work because they thought nobody would buy it. When I managed to persuade them, they first of all insisted on giving me the title. My title was *Feminist Critical Revolution*. I didn't like theirs —*The New Feminist Criticism*— because, as I told them, feminist criticism was not "new". Again they argued they had to call it "new" if they wanted to sell books. Finally I was exhausted and gave in. But new problems emerged: they said there were too many articles and that they'd have to charge such a high price for the book that no one would buy it. I discussed the mat-

ter with them for some time but at last they won, and of course a lot of the reviews complained that some positions were not represented, that I was not sympathetic to some stances and that I didn't include enough black women and lesbians. The only thing I have to say is that, against my will, I had to choose between bringing out the work with all the restrictions imposed by the publishers —being aware on the other hand that it is not always easy to find a press to bring it out— and forgetting about the project, thus losing the opportunity to provide an accessible collection of articles from many sources and journals. With all the limitations I think it has been a very useful book.

Q.: Feminist criticism made remarkable contributions after critics such as Kate Millet, Susan K. Cornillon and many others started questioning the representation of women in men's writings. In the last two decades it has exposed patriarchal prejudices and omissions; promoted the discovery and reevaluation of long neglected or forgotten women writers and scrutinized the social and cultural contexts of literature and criticism. In the 70's, for instance, feminist critics adopted a female-oriented perspective by focusing on women's writings and in the 80's there have been feminist critics practising psychoanalytical, reader-response and deconstructive criticism as well as somatic and Jungarian myth criticism. Which, in your opinion, have been the most meaningful aspects of the history of feminist critical thought?

A.: Well, I wouldn't want to choose. I don't think one can point out a particular stage, since the work has been so diverse and remarkable. After all, when the women's movement started there were many brilliant women at the universities. It wasn't that we were under-represented, especially in literature departments; it's just that we had never thought we could talk about women. So, when it became possible to do feminist scholarship, an enormous intellectual energy was released that went into that work. There was an explosion of creativity and ideas. Also it's not surprising that you get a lot of people who were not doing original work but were consolidating and extending the discoveries of others. This process continues to be very dynamic, very alive, especially in the countries where feminist thought is open to an international and interdisciplinary perspective. For example, in the USA —where a lot of work in other languages is translated fairly rapidly, and where there is an interest in ideas from other countries and in other disciplines— feminist scholarship continues to be creative and exciting. However, in my opinion, the opposite is true in France. If you go to Paris and go into a bookstore you find very few translations from other countries. A lot of the feminist literary classics from other countries have never been translated into French. They don't translate the British, the Americans, or the Germans, except if it's about psychoanalysis. It's a country where feminist criticism is not as vibrant or open as it is in other places.

Q.: In your article "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" you coined the term "gynocritics", which quickly became commonly used to depict one of the main critical projects of feminist literary thought: the (re)creation of a critical discourse on works written by women. Do we run the risk of becoming too comfortable in the ghetto of women's writings?

A.: Well, I don't know whether it's too comfortable. Many traditional male scholars still find it controversial and even unprofessional to work on women's writing and women's art. Moreover, there is still a great deal of work to be done. Gynocritics made an important beginning but of course it's not the only thing to do. A lot of my work now is about male writers. However, I don't think you have to choose between one or the other. When I wrote those essays (now well over ten years ago) it seemed to me very important to focus on women's writings, in part because there really was no vocabulary for talking about the specificity of men's writing. But now that has changed a lot, partly because of the work that has been done by gay men. In fact, I feel that gay men starting to talk about masculinity was a kind of pioneering action. Now to talk about gender rather than women is really a valid enterprise, no longer one-sided.

Q.: I saw that in your last book, *Speaking of Gender*, where you shift from gynocritics to gender as a category of analysis. I gather that gender is the term that best articulates a plurality of voices and practices as it assumes that all reading and writing, by men as well as by women, is marked by gender.

A.: Yes, my focus has shifted along with a change in the centrality of the field. When I began doing my work my audience was 99% women and it was that audience that made it possible for me to write. I could not have finished my degree and published my work if it hadn't been for feminist support. Then there was a middle period when feminist criticism became a fashionable critical theory and some men came to the talks. But they came to correct our theory, and to insist that everyone had to use the language of post-structuralism. I found that a very unhappy period, a detour. But soon after it began to be clear that feminist theory had a great deal in common with gay and black studies. We were working on the same kinds of problems. My work now depends very much on shared ideas and paradigms from other disciplines, and I am doing more feminist criticism of male writers as well as work on American women writers.

Q.: Some feminist critics have tried to use archetypal analysis to trace common patterns in women's fiction, very much in the line of Jung, Campbell or Frye, though attentive to gender variations in image and plot. What do you think about this archetypal criticism? Does it still have a place in the US?

A.: I think less and less. Of course, it will always appeal to some people; it's a more spiritual and more religious approach. But it never meant very much to me.

Q.: Do you believe in an autonomous literary history by and about women?

A.: Well, yes and no. It's very useful to write a women's literary history. I'm myself trying to do that now with American women writers, but it's not necessarily a history that separates women from the dominant male literature. Women were certainly reading it or interacting with it. When I wrote *A Literature of their Own* I deliberately tried not to rely on male authorities. However, I don't think that's such an important task anymore or so necessary. On the other hand, it's also very different to talk about American women writers and English. A lot of people said to me

“How can you say that women have their own literature?” “What is a literature of women?” But nobody ever said to me “What do you mean by English literature?” That was not in question, but it is today.

Q.: That reminds me of Elizabeth Janeway when she tried to explain women’s literature by citing T.S. Eliot’s attitude toward what we know as American literature. At first he held that it didn’t exist, that there was only one English literature, but later he was to acknowledge that there were two literatures in the same language.

A.: Yes. I would argue that when you talk about Americans in 1990 you do have to ask that question because it’s not just that there are women writers who are Americans, it’s rather a question of what makes them Americans. No doubt in the post-industrial age nations are more like each other but they still have peculiar features. For example, America is not that different from the rest of the world but, on the other hand, it’s also a much more complex, a much bigger country than England. When *A Literature of their Own* came out, one of the criticisms that was made—and I reprinted this in *The New Feminist Criticism*—was, again, that I didn’t talk about black writers, that it was racist. For God’s sake! Black English women writers? In the 19th century? Can they name any? I made a decision that I’d never respond to criticism, but I was amazed that people could behave like this. Racial diversity would only have been possible if I had been writing about American writers, where it is a basic and continuing issue. Only recently has it become an issue in England.

Q.: Quoting from one of your works, “feminist criticism demanded not just the recognition of women’s writings but a radical rethinking of the conceptual ground of literature.” To what extent to you think that feminist criticism has altered the assumptions of literary study?

A.: Oh, a great deal. The rise of other forms of literary theory at the same time obviously worked with feminist criticism to bring about change. There was much in Post-structuralism and in Deconstruction that aided feminist criticism. In other fields, too, for instance in Afro-American studies, some critics acknowledged feminist criticism as having opened new doors for them. Feminist critics are unusually open to other approaches. They were genuinely interested in opening up new fields, they were extremely receptive to innovative work in every direction. I think there’s always the fear, however, that women’s studies is just a phase. I see this most in England, because there the women’s movement was always associated with the Left. They are suspicious of any feminist who is successful or prominent. It is very hard, therefore, for leadership to emerge or for women to take power. The example of Thatcher makes it even worse, since she is so detested by the Left. All female power seems suspect and tainted. Whereas in America...

Q.: ...feminist critics have been much more efficient. They have managed to gain important positions within the academic ranks and have been able to change power structures.

A.: Exactly. I think that you have to do that; one should have access to those institutions and that means to be the heads of departments, to be professors, to be

involved in publishing and certainly when all this happens there is a kind of resentment and hostility coming out, but it isn't as profound as it is in some other places.

Q.: Have you ever felt your work being disregarded or ignored by your male colleagues because it has a feminist orientation?

A.: In the past, of course. In the US —again the situation I know best— feminist criticism is extremely successful. People are very interested in it and, at the university, if you are a woman you are almost expected to be interested in it. In whatever field... Medieval literature, 18th c., etc. Furthermore, I find both my male undergraduates and my male graduate students are very interested in feminism and they also feel they have to know about it to get jobs. People keep saying every year “it's dead, it's over, no one wants it any more.” But still every publishing house keeps bringing out books which are very successful...

Nevertheless, although some men are gradually coming round, I think there are many others who feel hostility and embarrassment. If there are two or three women working in a department, men will say “women are taking over this department.” Even if it is a very disproportionate number —perhaps 3 women and 17 men as it happens in my department. Success in women is certainly not accepted in a casual way.

Q.: Throughout this interview you have employed the words “interaction” and “interdisciplinary” several times. Does that mean that you feel it is possible to have an interrelation among the arts? What do you think of the work of, for instance, Sherrie Levine, Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, or that new artistic trend connected with the New Museum and AIDS?

A.: I think it's fascinating. It is very engaged with literature and very engaged with the kinds of questions about representation and gender that we are asking. I have a book that is coming out this summer called *Sexual Anarchy* which is about both men and women (mostly about England but also the US and Europe). In that book I deal with art and film and use work by Barbara Kruger among others.

Q.: What do you think of a novelist like Kathy Acker, whose works are pastiches of the great male masters like Cervantes, Dickens...?

A.: I think it's interesting in the abstract but I don't like it very much. However, I have some women friends who are painters and video artists, and I'm immensely stimulated by their works. I try to keep up with work by women in art, photography, video and film.

Q.: Cindy Sherman and some others like Kruger, Levine, Viola, etc., are becoming very popular here in Spain...

A.: I think Cindy Sherman's work, which I've seen in Paris too, has a lot to say about originality and women's relation to the male tradition. I also liked very much a show I went to in Barcelona by Meret Oppenheim. I immediately felt I wanted to write something about her.

Q.: Yes, you quoted her in your lecture, too. In fact, the exhibition you mentioned has fascinated many people. It has shown a woman who was very liberal for her time, both in her life (the photographs of her taken by Man Ray

were a real scandal then) and work (the use of new materials in her sculptures, for example in *Déjeuner en fourrure* or *Ma gouvernante*). In fact, she rebelled against the Establishment, and this was a hard stance to hold: as late as 1975 she argued that “being an artist is quite hard, but if, on top of that, you are a woman-artist, the situation is even worse”.

Some French feminist writers have made a tremendous impact on the recent Anglo-Saxon scene. What do you think of Helene Cixous’s urging women to write *feminine*, that is, disrupting language in favour of what is silenced or unrepresented. Can you see any liberating potentials in these practices?

A.: I think Cixous is a wonderful writer, now she’s a great classic. 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. However, in general, all feminist stances have contributed to a genuine shift in critical and cultural paradigms. Happily, there are now many kinds of feminist criticism, and many productive theories.