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ABSTRACT

A review of the history of criticism applied to the arts, literature, and drama is provided in this paper and related to the need for feminist criticism. The differences of critical opinion as to whether art should reproduce life or stand on its own are discussed. The paper notes that the role and nature of art and artists have been continuously reexamined and so too must the relationship of critics to art criticism be reexamined. It is suggested that the issues remain controversial, but that there is growing awareness by some that women artists and critics have not always been welcome in the worlds of academic and professional theatre and that their art and scholarship have not always been considered and evaluated on their own merits. (MKM)

FEMINIST CRITICISM: A BACKGROUND

PATTI P. GILLESPIE

Lillian Robinson and Lise Vogel called attention to issues that underlie the contemporary call for a feminist criticism when they recorded the confession of a woman student of art. The anonymous woman wrote:

> "It is obvious that good art has no sex." So Art News tells me. So I have learned to agree. But reading the categorical statement takes me back to my own "naive" responses. I already had my Master's in art history when my husband and I spent a summer in Europe. One afternoon at the museum, we stopped in front of Boucher's Reclining Girl. She is lying on her belly, naked, her elbows supporting the upper part of her rosy body and her legs spread wide apart. My husband looked for a moment and observed with mock pedantry, "Ah yes, a nude of the turn-her-over-and fuck-her school?" But I didn't want to turn her over and fuck her. Nor did I want to compete with her candid sexuality. What I felt was her exposure and vulnerability -- and I felt that I shared them. We were both supposed to believe that this portrait of a teenaged mistress of Louis XV "is [according to a reputable critic] a triumph of simple and memorable design, and shows Boucher's delight in the sheer painting

of flesh." As I progressed through graduate school, even such contradictory judgments as this began to come naturally to me, too.[1]

The dispute over whether feminist criticism is needed is neither trivial nor isolated. As the anecdote implies, it is flourishing in the visual arts. As Mary Ellman points out in her book Thinking About Women, the controversy is raging in the literary arts,[2] and as recent journal articles and convention programs make clear, in the theatre arts as well. That the dispute is both widespread and heated should not be surprising, for imbedded within it are issues central to continuing disagreements about the role and nature of art and criticism. For example, is the currency of art ideas, as George Bernard Shaw would have it? Or is art important precisely because of its absolute uselessness, as Oscar Wilde has urged? Is the criticism of art essentially ahistorical? Elder Olson thinks so and insists that "truth is never obsolete" and that if a critical method is true it "must be taken as valid and permanently valid, however art may develop in the future, and all objections to it are either trivial or irrelevant."[3] Or is the criticism of art essentially culture-bound, time-bound, historical, as Northrop Frye alleges, when he complains that the history of criticism is little more than a history of taste?

The persistence with which such issues are raised, and the elusiveness of general agreement concerning them argue forcefully for their importance. The controversy over the desireability of a feminist criticism is, of course, one aspect of this larger dispute over the nature of art and of criticism. The resolution of the first is therefore important in part for the insights that it may provide for the resolution of the second, larger controversy. To place the feminist controversy in perspective, therefore, a brief overview of the larger issues may be useful.

Theoretical statements about the nature of drama have changed markedly through the centuries. For Aristotle, the first formal critic, tragedy was defined in terms of the structural integration of certain internal elements like plot, character, diction, and so on. For seventeenth-century Neo-Classicists, on the other hand, the form tragedy was defined according to the degree of its correspondence with an ideal model whose qualities included adherence to verisimilitude, decorum, and the three unities. By the early nineteenth century, tragedy and other works of art were distinguished by the degree to which they affected their perceivers, arousing emotions and insights within them, and at the century's end, the dominant view was that theatrical arts should reproduce, with photographic exactitude, the trials of everyday life in order to effect their eventual improvement.

Obviously, as assumptions about the nature and function of art change, so too must assumptions about the role of critics and criticism. Thus, a follower of Aristotle might examine a work of drama to discover the operation of its internal elements while a seventeenth-century academician compared an art work with a theoretical model. Early nineteenth century romantic critics might examine their personal responses to a work while later realists spoke in terms of the art's social utility.

Despite numerous temporal and regional variations, the prevailing views of art and criticism through most of recorded history could be usefully reduced to two: the view that an art work is "an object, complete in itself," a self-contained and self-sufficient work to be examined for itself, the view that Aristotle promulgated in his Poetics; and its alternative, the view that art is an instrument intended to do something to a perceiver, an audience, or even a society, a position that Plato assumed in his Republic.[4]

During the nineteenth century, however, a powerful new possibility was revealed. Art, including drama and theatre, could be viewed primarily as a product of the age that produced it. Probably as an outgrowth of nineteenth-century antiquarianism, itself the result of a rising sense of history and a fascination with the revolutionary notions of Darwin, Mendel, and Freud, increasing numbers of critics studied works of art in terms of the traditions from which they sprang or the cultural ambience of the artists who made them. The lives of authors, therefore, were investigated for clues about their works: the religion, politics, state of health, and even sexual proclivities were considered relevant data for promoting an understanding of the art work. Literary trends, artistic firsts, presumed evolution and development were plumbed in order to illuminate the reasons for a work's form, structure, style, and ideas. Some critics even began to rely on extra-literary paradigms in order to explain works of art: thus Oedipus Rex was examined through a Freudian lens, The Suppliant Maidens was seen as a missing link between dithyramb and tragedy, and Julius Caesar, through the prism of Marxist thought, emerged as an indictment of capitalism. The assumptions were clear: a play might be the result of subconscious urges, relentless systemic development, or economic forces from the society at large. By the beginning of the twentieth century, both undergraduate and graduate programs in literature and drama were dominated by this approach, the basic assumption of which was that art was the result of something that existed prior to it.

The view, however, soon came under attack. By the late 1930s, a strong and insistent backlash had set in, led by the so-called New Critics (out of Oxford by way of Vanderbilt) and the Neo-Aristotelians from Chicago. Through the efforts of these theorists, criticism again focused on the work of art as a self-contained and self-sufficient structure that was worthy of study. Factors external to the art work were dismissed as irrelevant, and again "formalism, that great block of aesthetic ice," maintained by "powerful refrigeration apparatuses of English departments everywhere" prevailed and conspired to preserve literature "in a crystal cube touching no one and nothing."[5] Again, a poem (according to the leaders of literary thought) should not mean but be. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, formalism as practiced by the New Critics and Neo-Aristotelians dominated the academic programs in English and drama at most undergraduate and graduate programs, even while the theory it had supplanted still flourished in departments of history and comparative literature and in programs called "a history of ideas."

But soon, for some, the sterility of formalism was unbearable, and so when the American society began its convulsive reexaminations in the mid-1960s, the notion that art was an object that was to be objectively analyzed and scientifically investigated was one of the many that was subjected to scrutiny. Theorists and critics in the arts began to chip away at the crystalline purity of an art that was self-contained, distant, and uninvolved. Leaders in the assault on formalism were the Marxist critics, some of whom had already enjoyed a brief vogue during the 1930s. Art in the 1960s again was increasingly viewed as an instrument for promoting change, but the change now was to be a social one rather than the personal one urged by the earlier Romantics. Art was to be an instrument of social as well as aesthetic changes.

In the 1960s not only the nature of the art but also that of the artist came under increasing scrutiny. Joining the older view that an artist was a genius whose insights were profound and whose talent would burst forth against all attempts to suppress it was another view. Artists were seen as the products of forces outside themselves. Resting heavily on the views of Piaget and others that intelligence, talent, imagination, and creativity were abilities that are painstakingly built, incrementally and continuously from the moment of birth, some theorists concluded that an environment as well as an artist produces an art. Linda Nochlin summarized this position well: "art is not a free autonomous activity of a super-endowed individual, 'influenced' by previous artists, and more vaguely and superficially by 'social forces' but rather, that in the total situation of art making both in terms of the development of the art maker and in the nature and quality of the work of art itself, occur in a social situation, are integral elements of this social structure, and are moderated and determined by specific and definable social institutions."[6]

At the same time that assumptions about the role and nature of art and the artist were being reexamined, so too were previously held assumptions about the role and nature of critics and criticism. Previously the role of the critic in criticism had been largely unexplored. True, during the Romantic period, a certain subjectivity was acknowledged, and even exalted, but generally the view was that a critic undertook the task of criticism largely unencumbered by systematic biases or deep personal prejudices. The art of criticism was thus perceived as a pure act, the more so with the strength of the New Critics and Neo-Aristotelians, who saw both the artist and the critic as separate from the world of the art work.

Among the first to call this view of critics and criticism into serious question were the Marxists, who noted that most critics, like most artists, were white, middle- or upper-middle class, and male. Some Marxists therefore began to wonder in print if the art being taught in the schools and applauded in the press was not in fact elitist, aimed at the established consumer of a capitalistic society. Louis Kampf asked, for example, "why is the joy of a refined esthetic emotionally available to me -- a middle-class academic, an intellectual -- but not to others?" He then described his new awareness of the nature of art: "When I last stood in the Piazza Navona. . . . I hardly dared think of the crimes, the human suffering, which made both the scene and my being there possible. . . Our esthetics are rooted in surplus value." As Kampf spoke of the art, Frederick Crews spoke of its critics: "The history of literary study is transparently a history of intellectual and political fashion, never more so than in recent formalism. . . . "[8] Bruce Franklin was even more outspoken about the degree to which criticism was a means by which the established views were promulgated in order to maintain the social distinctions among classes that he saw an inherent in a capitalistic system. He traced a clear historical relationship between the rise of formalism and that of fascism in the United States.[9]

What several Marxist critics implied, angry Blacks of the 1960s alleged: traditional criticism and the art it approved was simply another mechanism of the powerful to deny respectability and acceptance to the masses, who remained powerless. As Negroes shed both their reticence and their label and launched an aggressive drive toward civil rights for Black Americans, their artists and critics in noticeable numbers began questioning the relevance of Western (white) art for African (black) people. Out of the questioning grew, for some, a rejection of historically accepted artistic standards as a proper basis for judging the work of black artists. Something called the Black Aesthetic developed and demanded a black art that was the "spiritual sister of the Black Power concept", and that spoke "directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America."[10]

A black aesthetic required a black criticism, a new way of examining works by black artists, a way that would evaluate their art according to criteria relevant to the lives and needs of black people. Addison Gayle put the matter squarely and succinctly: "The question for a black critic today is not how beautiful a melody, a play, a poem, or a novel is, but how much more beautiful has the poem, melody, or play made the life of a single black man."[11] The point was made over and over again, in different words but in the same spirit: a group like

Blacks who had been excluded from a culture could not partake of the arts of that culture. Blacks could neither produce, consume, nor critique classical arts of the West because those arts were the product of an alien culture. In theatre such views found strident expression in the polemics of LeRoi Jones and benign support in the voice of Douglas Turner Ward. Whatever the form of the statement, however, the message was clear: a new art was needed, and for it, a new aesthetic and a new kind of criticism.

As the sixties wound down and agitation surrounding Blacks subsided, calls for a black aesthetic and black criticism were muted. But another social convulsion loomed on the horizon. "There is one ultimate revolution which encompasses them all, and that is the liberation of the female of the species so that the male of the species may be freed forever from supermasculine compulsion and may join his sister in full and glorious humanity. And fuck marriage." With these words, Myrna Lamb described, in 1970, the newest attack on established traditions and enshrined assumptions. Women's Liberation replaced Black Power as the major social controversy of the 1970s. Parallels between the two movements were readily apparent and early noted. Astute listeners had no difficulty in identifying the problems cited by women as echoes of those earlier attacked by Blacks. It was thus predictable when some women began to question the proper role of art, of the artist, of critics, and of criticism in their lives.

As among Blacks during the 1960s, there is disagreement among women artists and scholars themselves over the desireability of a special art or a special criticism aimed especially at women. Rosalyn Drexler does not want the word "woman" used to define the kind of art she creates;[13] Margot Lewitin denies that Women's Interart Theatre is some sort of "outpost for women's lib;"[14] Margaret Lamb does not want any criticism based on a "limited feminist view that closes down rather than opens up a play."[15] On the other hand, the collective group called Women of the Burning City develop scripts for women audiences only; the Lavender Cellar Theatre exists to provide "a positive perspective of lesbian lifestyles,"[16] and Mary Ellman documents systematic bias against women by male writers before calling for feminist critics as a proper antidote to the current literary scene.

The issues remain controversial, the answers elusive. The controversy over feminist criticism, although timely, is not faddish, for it focuses attention once more on disagreements about the true nature and the appropriate role of art that have persisted from the fifth century B.C. As well, it highlights disputes that erupted during the 1960s over the power of critics and criticism. But additionally, it stresses the growing awareness of some that women artists and critics have not always been welcome in the worlds of the academic and professional theatre and that their art and scholarship have not always been considered and evaluated on their own merits. Perhaps, as Ellman suggests, it is time to expose criticism that is essentially phallic rather than fair and to attack the assumption that "there must always be two literatures like two public toilets, one for Men and one for Women."[17]

ENDNOTES

[1] As reported in their article "Modernism and History," in Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives," ed. Susan Koppelman Cornillon (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Press, 1972), p. 280.

[2]Mary Ellman, Thinking About Women (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1968).

[3]Elder Olson, The Theory of Comedy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp. 28,30.

[4]I am indepted to Oscar Brockett, "Poetry as Instrument," in Rhetoric and Poetic, ed. Donald C. Bryant (Iowa City; University of Iowa Press, 1964), pp. 15-25, for many of the ideas in this section of my essay.

[5]Fraya Katz-Stoker, "The Other Criticism; Feminism vs. Formalism," in Images of Women, p. 315.

[6]Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Art News 60, 9(January 1971): 32.

[7]As reported by Robinson and Vogel, p. 281.

[8]As reported by Katz-Stoker, p. 320.

[9]Katz-Stoker, p. 321.

[10]Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in The Black Aesthetic, ed. Addison Gayle (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1971), p. 272.

[11]Addison Gayle, "Introduction," in The Black Aesthetic, p. xxiii.

[12]Myrna Lamb, "Introduction," Plays of Women's Liberation: The Mod Donna and Scyklon Z (New York: Pathfinder Press, Inc., 1971), p. 28.

[13]Rosalyn Drexler, "Dialogue," Art News 60, 9(January 1971): 40. In a response to Nochlin, see note 6.

[14]Telephone interview with Cheryl Black, 8 April 1977. See Patti P. Gillespie, "Feminist Theatre: A Rhetorical Phenomenon," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 64 (October 1978): 291.

[15] Margaret Lamb, "Feminist Criticism," The Drama Review 18, 3 (September 1974): 49.

[16] See Gillespie, pp. 291, 286.

[17] See Ellman, "Phallic Criticism," pp. 28-54, and for the quotation, p. 33.