Scholarly Reading Notes · EN

From Feminist Criticism to Masculinities and Foucault

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Doctoral reading notes · Literary theory, gender and power

Whose experience does a literary history describe when it speaks of human experience? This is the question I return to in my reading of feminist literary criticism. Adding a woman writer to a syllabus still leaves us to ask what standards once made her work appear marginal. Reading George Eliot, the Brontës and Mary Shelley alongside later feminist criticism brings two histories into view. One concerns the circumstances in which women wrote and published. The other concerns the language in which readers have judged the value of their work.

Debates about race, class and sexuality give the plural in “women’s experiences” particular weight. Whose experience can stand for someone else’s? What interested me in poststructuralist criticism was the question of language. Who gets to speak in a narrative matters. So does the name given to her speech. An objection can count as evidence of reason in one character and excess in another. Asking who makes that distinction changes how we read.

When I came to masculinities research, my starting question shifted. How could a definition of masculinity as the opposite of femininity explain inequalities among men? Connell’s account of masculinities in the plural helps here. A man denied authority in the company of other men may exercise it in a different relationship. Hearn’s work on violence invites us to examine the relation in which an act takes place. Who can do what to whom, and who bears the consequences?

What held my attention in Tim Edwards was the distinction between changes in men’s social position and their experience of that position. A character’s sense of powerlessness deserves attention in its own right. Which decisions he can still make for others requires a separate inquiry. Asking both questions lets us listen to vulnerability while keeping the exercise of power in view.

The first volume of Foucault’s History of Sexuality takes these readings in another direction. Alongside the question of whom institutions silence, we can ask whom they invite to speak. Naming, recording and classifying an experience affect how the person living it can become known as a subject. Genealogy offers a literary reader a way to ask which historical questions gave rise to a category of identity that now seems natural.

What brings these readings together for me is a set of questions I can carry to a text. Whose experience counts as worth narrating? When someone feels powerless, what happens to the room others have to act? Whose knowledge supplies the names through which we come to know a person?

Reading sources · Gill Plain and Susan Sellers (eds), A History of Feminist Literary Criticism (2007). R. W. Connell, Masculinities (1995). Jeff Hearn, The Violences of Men (1998). Tim Edwards, Cultures of Masculinity (2006). Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume I, trans. Robert Hurley (1978).