LITERARY CRITICISM 4

Shakespeare from a feminist approach

Questions that guide you to analyze Shakespeare from a feminist point of view.

What stereotypes of women do you find?

Are they oversimplified, demeaning, untrue?

For example, are all blondes understood to be dumb?

■ Examine the roles women play in a work. Are they minor, supportive, powerless, obsequious? Or are they independent and influential?

■ Is the narrator a character in the narrative?

If so, how does the male or female point of view affect the reader's perceptions?

■ How do the male characters talk about the female characters?

How do the male characters treat the female characters?

■ How do the female characters act toward the male characters?

■ Who are the socially and politically powerful characters?

■ What attitudes toward women are suggested by the answers to these questions?

■ Do the answers to these questions indicate that the work lends itself more naturally to a study of differences between the male and female characters, a study of power imbalances between the sexes (or perhaps other groups), or a study of unique female experience?

■ Can any characters be viewed not simply as male or female but as a collection of many possible sexualities? That is, do they exhibit various degrees of heterosexuality, homosexuality, or bisexuality?

■ Is sexuality assumed to be stable and static or dynamic and changing?

■ Is the sexuality of the characters affected by the experience of race and class?

■ Is heterosexuality viewed as the norm against which other sexual identities are measured?

Gender related quotations in Macbeth

Act 1, Scene 3

Weird Sisters (the Witches)

> FIRST WITCH
> I'll drain him dry as hay.
> Sleep shall neither night nor day
> Hang upon his penthouse lid.
> He shall live a man forbid.
> Weary sev'nnights, nine times nine,
> Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine.
> Though his bark cannot be lost,
> Yet it shall be tempest-tossed. (1.3.19-26)

Here, the First Witch says that she's going to punish a sailor's wife by "drain[ing] [the sailor] dry as hay," which means that she's going to make the sailor impotent: no children, and no sex. *Macbeth* is definitely worried about male impotence—even Lady Macbeth makes a jab at her husband about it. Is that just a low blow, or does *Macbeth* actually associate sexual potency with masculinity?

Banquo

> BANQUO
> You should be women,
> And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
> That you are so. (1.3.47-49)

"Should" be: why? Because they look like women, or because they're obviously supernatural? And does the presence of a beard automatically disqualify someone from being a woman? (Don't tell the moustache-bleaching industry.)

Act 1, Scene 5

Lady Macbeth

> LADY MACBETH
> [...] Come, you spirits
> That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,

And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood.
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th' effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief. Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry "Hold, hold!" (1.5.47-61)

We can't be the only ones who get goosebumps during this speech. Right? Here, Lady Macbeth gets her freak on by calling on "spirits" to, basically, make her into the man her husband can't be. Tell us who the hero of this play is, again?

LADY MACBETH
Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be
What thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it.
[...] Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear
And chastise with the valoor of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round,
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee crowned withal. (1.5.15-20;28-33)

According to Lady Macbeth, her husband is ambitious, but he's also too "kind" to do what it takes to murder Duncan so that he, Macbeth, can be king. So what's a wife to

do? Lady Macbeth plans to "chastise" Macbeth with the "valour of [her] tongue," which is another way of saying she's going to nag her husband into taking action so he can be "crown'd withal." This speech establishes Lady Macbeth as the dominant partner in the relationship, which inverts typical 17th-century gender and social roles. Since husbands were supposed to "rule" their wives in the same way that kings ruled countries, Lady Macbeth's plan is just another version of treason: taking power that doesn't belong to you.

Act 1, Scene 7

Lady Macbeth

LADY MACBETH

Was the hope drunk
Wherein you dress'd yourself? hath it slept since?
And wakes it now, to look so green and pale
At what it did so freely? From this time
Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valor
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem,
Letting "I dare not" wait upon "I would,"
Like the poor cat i' th' adage?

MACBETH

Prithee, peace:
I dare do all that may become a man; (1.7.39-51)

Fun brain snack: Lady Macbeth calls her husband "green and pale," which sound to us a lot like "**green sickness**." Green sickness is another name for anemia, and for hundreds of years it was thought to be particularly a disease of young, virgin girls. So, by calling her husband "green and pale," Lady Macbeth is basically calling her husband a virgin girl. His response? "No, dude, I'm totally a man."

LADY MACBETH

[...] I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this. (1.7.62-67)

Here, Lady Macbeth takes breastfeeding —one of the fundamental biological traits of women as the Early Modern period saw it—makes it monstrous. She says that she's so good at keeping promises that she would actually kill a nursing child if she'd promised to do it. What's funny (*not* funny ha-ha) to us is that Macbeth has promised to kill his king, i.e. father figure; Lady Macbeth is talking about killing her child. Hmmm.

Macbeth

MACBETH
Bring forth men-children only,
For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males. (1.7.83-85)

Macbeth tells his wife that she's manly enough to only give birth to male-children. Sorry, Macbeth, but you're the one responsible for the Y-chromosome. But this is an interesting look at Early Modern ideas about gender: "masculinity" and "femininity" seem to be more about behavior than any particularly sex characteristics.

Act 2, Scene 3

Macduff

MACDUFF

O gentle lady,
'Tis not for you to hear what I can speak.
The repetition in a woman's ear
Would murder as it fell. (2.3.96-99)

LOL, Macduff. He's so tied to a notion of female gentleness that he can't believe Lady Macbeth could even *hear* about murder, much less plot one. See, guys? Sexism hurts everyone.

Act 3, Scene 4

Lady Macbeth

LADY MACBETH

Are you a man?

[...]

O, proper stuff!
This is the very painting of your fear.
This is the air-drawn dagger which you said
Led you to Duncan. O, these flaws and starts,
Impostors to true fear, would well become
A woman's story at a winter's fire,
Authorized by her grandam. Shame itself!
Why do you make such faces? When all's done,
You look but on a stool. (3.4.70;73-81)

In other words, Lady Macbeth is (yet again) telling Macbeth that he's acting like a girl—or, in this case, an old women. Honestly, we're a little surprised that—since this is Shakespeare and all —he didn't just up and kill her instead of Duncan.

Act 4, Scene 3

Macduff

MACDUFF
He has no children. All my pretty ones?
Did you say "all"? O hell-kite! All?
What, all my pretty chickens and their dam
At one fell swoop?

MALCOLM

Dispute it like a man.

MACDUFF

I shall do so,

But I must also feel it as a man.

I cannot but remember such things were

That were most precious to me. (4.3.255-262)

Quotation about women in Hamlet

'Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet,
To give these mourning duties to your father:
...but to persever
In obstinate condolement is a course
Of impious stubbornness; 'tis unmanly grief;
It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,
A heart unfortified, a mind impatient,
An understanding simple and unschool'd.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 2. Claudius mockingly labels Hamlet's excessive grief for his father as "unmanly." It goes against God's wishes and demonstrates a soft heart and uneducated mind, he tells the prince.

Frailty, thy name is woman!

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 2. Hamlet's most famous comment about Gertrude, Queen of Denmark and his mother, is a bitter condemnation of women in general. In this misogynistic outburst, he is lashing out at his mother's quick remarriage to his uncle after his father's death.

Then if he says he loves you,
It fits your wisdom so far to believe it

As he in his particular act and place
May give his saying deed; which is no further
Than the main voice of Denmark goes withal.
Then weigh what loss your honour may sustain,
If with too credent ear you list his songs,
Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open
To his unmaster'd importunity.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 3. Laertes warns Ophelia that she will stain her reputation if she gives up her virginity to Hamlet. When he speaks of opening her "chase treasure," this is a metaphor for losing her prized and precious virginity. Ophelia's brother is being misogynistic here as he puts the burden of shame on her and not Hamlet if she surrenders to Hamlet's persistent seductions.

And keep you in the rear of your affection,
Out of the shot and danger of desire,
The chariest maid is prodigal enough
If she unmasks her beauty to the moon.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 3. Some brotherly advice from Laertes as he warns his sister off Hamlet. He tells Ophelia not to give her virginity to a man outside of marriage because it can mean the ruination of her reputation.

I shall the effect of this good lesson keep
As watchman to my heart. But, good my brother,
Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven;
Whiles, like a puffed and reckless libertine,
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,
And recks not his own rede.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 3. We first meet Ophelia in this scene. Laertes has been warning her not to trust Hamlet's romantic declarations. Using a metaphor, Ophelia promises to keep Laertes' lesson "as watchman to my heart." But she also deftly turns her brother's religious advice back on him. For he is about to depart for study in Paris, a city full of moral temptations for a young man. Ophelia tells him not to preach like a hypocritical

pastor, showing her the “thorny way to heaven” while himself treading the “primrose path” of pleasures. After warning her to keep her chastity, she tells him not to be a “puffed and reckless libertine.”

‘Tis in my memory lock’d,
And you yourself shall keep the key of it.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 3. Ophelia assures Laertes that she will follow his advice after he counseled her to spurn the romantic advances of Hamlet and not give up her virginity – “chaste treasure” – to him. The theme of male control comes across strongly in Ophelia’s words. She paints a metaphorical image of handing her brother the keys to her mind and memory.

You speak like a green girl,
Unsifted in such perilous circumstance.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 3. The manipulative Polonius rails against Ophelia’s romantic relationship with Hamlet. Totally insensitive to his daughter’s feelings, he belittles her as an inexperienced girl unlearned in the ways of love. A controlling father, he treats his daughter like a child.

OPHELIA: I do not know, my lord, what I should think.
POLONIUS: Marry, I’ll teach you: think yourself a baby
That you have ta’en these tenders for true pay,
Which are not sterling.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 3. In his attempts to control Ophelia and her relationship with Hamlet, Polonius ridicules his daughter. Using two metaphors, he compares her to a infant he has to teach and describes Hamlet’s “tenders” or expressions of affections as “not sterling” – not true silver coins. He tells Ophelia to put a higher value on herself when it comes to Hamlet or she will make her father look a fool. Polonius thinks he is being clever by punning in response to Ophelia’s use of “tenders” when she speaks of Hamlet’s letters of affection to her. On being confronted by her father’s bullying and the patriarchal misogyny of her brother Laertes, Ophelia feels that she lacks her own voice and even the ability to think.

Be somewhat scanter of your maiden presence.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 3. Polonius instructs Ophelia to spend less time with Hamlet. He wants to control his daughter's romantic relationships and doesn't really want her seeing the prince. The unfortunate Ophelia is so under the control and rule of the men in her life, that her life is not her own.

Do not believe his vows; they are brokers,
Not of that dye which their investments show,
But mere implorators of unholy suits,
Breathing like sanctified and pious bawds,
The better to beguile.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 3. Using a complex metaphor and personification, Polonius urges his daughter not to take Hamlet's professions of love seriously, because his words and pledges cannot be trusted. Polonius likens the prince's vows to brokers acting on his behalf. He says that they may be dressed in good clothes and pretending to be holy. But the reality is that they are pimps ("bawds"), pleading their unholy case ("suits"), in order to deceive and charm Ophelia, Polonius claims. He is telling her that Hamlet just wants her for sex.

O most pernicious woman!
O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!
My tables, – meet it is I set it down,
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain:
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 5. Hamlet is enraged after the Ghost's revelation that his father was murdered by his own brother Claudius, who took the crown and Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, as his Queen. He describes his mother as wicked, and Claudius as a smiling villain. Hamlet's comment of how one can smile and be a villain is a perfect example of how people can be two-faced and hypocritical and hide their true nature from the world.

My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,
Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced;
No hat upon his head; his stockings foul'd,

Ungarter'd, and down-gyved to his ancle;
Pale as his shirt; his knees knocking each other;
And with a look so piteous in purport
As if he had been loosed out of hell
To speak of horrors, – he comes before me.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 1. Ophelia is frightened when Hamlet suddenly entered her room in a disheveled condition. She doesn't know what to do and expresses concern about Hamlet's strange behavior to her father Polonius. Her reliance on Polonius reinforces the idea that she is dependant on male figures and does not have the ability to think for herself. Polonius tells her Hamlet is mad with love.

He took me by the wrist and held me hard;
Then goes he to the length of all his arm;
And, with his other hand thus o'er his brow,
He falls to such perusal of my face.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 1. A frightened Ophelia recounts Hamlet's unruly behavior towards her when he burst into her chamber, gripping her by the wrist and concentrating hard on her face.

With devotion's visage
And pious action we do sugar o'er
The devil himself.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1. Polonius tells Ophelia that we use the appearance of religious devotion and piety to mask the evil within ourselves. He is giving a prayer book to Ophelia to read, demanding that she pretend to read it for an encounter with Hamlet. Claudius has sent for Hamlet, who will "accidentally" run into Ophelia. The plan is for Polonius and Claudius to hide behind a tapestry to spy on Hamlet, hoping to learn if his strange behavior is because he is sick with love. Polonius is at his hypocritical and deceitful best here, playing the misogynist who cynically uses his daughter for his own ends to ingratiate himself with the King. This is after earlier ordering Ophelia to end her relationship with Hamlet.

Are you honest?...
Are you fair?...
For the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to be a bawd...
I did love you once.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1. Hamlet to Ophelia, asking her if she is pure and beautiful. He says that the power of beauty is more likely to change a good girl into a whore, and adds that he used to love her. He is very insulting to Ophelia's chastity. This is an example of dramatic irony, as Hamlet is really venting his anger towards his mother Gertrude, being disgusted by the process of love and marriage, and believing that beauty corrupts virtue. The cruel and cynical outburst to Ophelia is misdirected here, she is being used by all the men in the scene, her father Polonius, Claudius and by Hamlet to vent his frustrations towards his mother.

Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1. Hamlet appears to go a little barking mad here with this wild misogynistic statement. It comes after Ophelia tries to hand him back his love letters. He insultingly tells her that she should lock herself away in a convent so she can abstain from sex, and not get married and have children.

We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1. Hamlet says that all men are downright scoundrels and Ophelia should not believe any of them.

Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery, go.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1. Hamlet to Ophelia, as he questions her purity, impying that she is unchaste and needs to get herself off to a nunnery.

If thou wilt marry, marry a fool, for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1. Hamlet offers this critique on women to Ophelia. He has a very negative view of women here, saying that when they marry they are unfaithful to their husbands.

I have heard of your paintings too, well enough; God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another...It hath made me mad.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1. Hamlet claims that the deceitfulness of women, who are given one face by God but use makeup to create another, is what has driven him to madness.

Do you think I meant country matters?

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 2. Hamlet is being very misogynistic here, making crude sexual jokes to Ophelia as she tries to make polite conversation about the play they are watching. "Country" is a pun on the word for female genitals.

That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 2. Hamlet makes a sexual remark towards Ophelia and then goes to lie near her feet in front of everyone.

HAMLET: Is this a prologue, or the posy of a ring?
OPHELIA: 'Tis brief, my lord.
HAMLET: As woman's love.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 2. Hamlet is not a big believer in female fidelity. But his bitter remark is really directed towards his mother Gertrude, who has tainted his view of all women. An example of dramatic irony.

The lady doth protest too much, methinks.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 2. Gertrude to Hamlet, asked how she is enjoying the play created by Hamlet. Gertrude criticizes the overacting of the Player Queen, claiming as excessive her promises of love to the Player King and vow never to remarry – which she does. She believes the Player Queen appears hypocritical. Ironically Queen Gertrude in real life also remarries after King Hamlet's death.

Her speech is nothing,
Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
The hearers to collection. They yawn at it
And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,
Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 4, Scene 5. A gentlemen reports to Queen Gertrude and Horatio on Ophelia's descent into madness and her lack of clarity and mental coherence. Controlled by men, let down by men, Ophelia is completely mentally shattered after the death of her controlling father Polonius and her rejection by Hamlet.

He is dead and gone, lady,
He is dead and gone,
At his head a green-grass tuft;
At his heels a stone.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 4, Scene 5. Ophelia sings about mourning the recent death of a loved one. The song is about the loss of her father Polonius, who played a central role in her life but was also a very controlling force. It is also about her loss of Hamlet, whom she loved. She is insane at this stage.

Young men will do 't if they come to 't,
By Cock they are to blame.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 4, Scene 5. Ophelia, in her madness, sings a sexually explicit song about a flightly young man who promises love and then backs out after a brief time. The lines suggest that she and Hamlet may have had a sexual relationship. They also echo the theme of exploitaton and oppression of women by men.

Quoth she, Before you tumbled me
You promised me to wed.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 4, Scene 5. In Ophelia's song, during her mad phase, a man promises to marry a woman and then leaves her after bedding her. Many believe she is speaking about herself and Hamlet. Her madness allows her to give voice to her feelings and to sing about men who exploit young women – like her. Literary critic Carol Thomas Neely sees Ophelia's madness to be "her liberation from silence, obedience, and constraint or her absolute victimization by patriarchal oppression."

Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia,
And therefore I forbid my tears; but yet
It is our trick, nature her custom holds,
Let shame say what it will: when these are gone,
The woman will be out. – Adieu, my lord:
I have a speech of fire, that fain would blaze,
But that this folly drowns it.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 4, Scene 7. Gertrude has just told Laertes that Ophelia has drowned. Laertes cannot hold back his tears for the sister he loved. He has lost his father and now his sister. This turns out to be the breaking point for Laertes and sets him firmly on a revenge quest against Hamlet. Crying is not a manly thing to Laertes, he says that after he stops crying "the woman will be out."

Now get you to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come.

– William Shakespeare

Hamlet, Act 5, Scene 1. Hamlet tells Yorick's skull to tell his mother the Queen that no matter how much makeup she applies to herself, she too will end up like Yorick, dead and her flesh decayed. Hamlet is scorning Gertrude for marrying his uncle so soon after his King Hamlet's death.

Gender scene in Romeo and Juliet

Contents

No table of contents entries found.

Act 1, Scene 1

GREGORY
I will frown as I pass by, and let them take it
as they list.

SAMPSON
Nay, as they dare. I will bite my thumb at
them, which is a disgrace to them, if they bear it.
(1.1.41-44)

Oh no he did not: this is basically the equivalent of flipping someone the bird while sticking out your tongue. So, the Capulets are being insulting and childish all at the same time—but if the Montagues don't get offended (if they "bear" it), then *they're* the ones who'll be disgraced. Seems a little backward to us.

SAMPSON
My naked weapon is out. Quarrel, I will back
thee.
(1.1.34-35)

Physical violence is equated with forceful sexuality, and both are proof of manliness.

GREGORY [House of Capulet]
Do you quarrel, sir?

ABRAHAM [House of Montague]
Quarrel sir? No, sir.

SAMPSON [House of Capulet]
But if you do, sir, I am for you. I serve as
good a man as you.

ABRAHAM [House of Montague]
No better.

SAMPSON [House of Capulet]
Well, sir.

GREGORY*, aside to Sampson* [House of Capulet]
Say 'better'; here comes
one of my master's kinsmen.

SAMPSON [House of Capulet]
Yes, better, sir.

ABRAHAM [House of Montague]
You lie.

SAMPSON [House of Capulet]
Draw, if you be men.—Gregory, remember
thy swashing blow.
(1.1.53-64)

This argument is about as mature as two kids in the schoolyard arguing about whose dad has a better job. Unfortunately, it's a lot more deadly.

SAMPSON
'Tis true; and therefore women, being the
weaker vessels, are ever thrust to the wall. Therefore
I will push Montague's men from the wall, and
thrust his maids to the wall.

GREGORY
The quarrel is between our masters and us
their men.

SAMPSON
'Tis all one, I will show myself a tyrant.
when I have fought with the men, I will be civil
with the maids; I will cut off their heads.

GREGORY
The heads of the maids?

SAMPSON
Ay, the heads of the maids, or their maidenheads.
Take it in what sense thou wilt.
(1.1.16-27)

You know what's really manly? Rape and murder. Trust a bunch of hotheaded servants to define masculinity in a really brutal, antisocial way, right?

Act 1, Scene 2

Lord Capulet

CAPULET
[...]
My child is yet a stranger in the world.
She hath not seen the change of fourteen years,
Let two more summers wither in their pride
Ere we may think her ripe to be a bride.

PARIS
Younger than she are happy mothers made.
(1.2.8-12)

You know what's missing from this friendly little negotiation about marrying off Juliet? Juliet herself. Women (or girls) from wealthy families in Shakespeare's time didn't

usually get much say in who they married; marriages were made for the convenience of the families, not the individuals.

Act 1, Scene 5

Tybalt Capulet

> TYBALT
> This, by his voice, should be a Montague.—
> Fetch me my rapier, boy.
> What dares the slave
> Come hither covered with an antic face
> To fleer and scorn at our solemnity?
> Now, by the stock and honor of my kin,
> To strike him dead, I hold it not a sin.
> (1.5.61-67)

Tybalt's notion of honour is all bound up in the masculine code of revenge: if he doesn't fight back against the teeniest, tiniest little insult, then his reputation as a man is in danger. Notice how male reputations are all about what they do (fight) and women's are all about what they don't do (have sex)?

Act 2, Scene 4

Mercutio

> MERCUTIO
> Why, is not this better now than groaning
> for love? now art thou sociable, now art thou
> Romeo, now art thou what thou art, by art as well as
> by nature. For this driveling love is like a great
> natural that runs lolling up and down to hide his
> bauble in a hole.
> (2.4.90-95)

Translation: being in love makes Romeo seem like a "natural," i.e. someone who's mentally challenged, and runs around trying to hide a toy. Hm. Is Mercutio a little jealous of Juliet? Is he worried that she's going to break up the band, Yoko-style?

Act 3, Scene 1

Romeo

ROMEO
This gentleman, the Prince's near ally,
My very friend, hath got his mortal hurt
In my behalf. My reputation stained
With Tybalt's slander—Tybalt, that an hour
Hath been my cousin! O sweet Juliet,
Thy beauty hath made me effeminate
And in my temper softened valor's steel!
(3.1.114-120)

Brain snack: for centuries, "effeminate" didn't just mean that you were acting like a woman; it meant that you liked women too much. And hanging around sucking up to women would make you womanly—just like catching cooties.

ROMEO
Alive in triumph, and Mercutio slain!
Away to heaven, respective lenity,
And fire-eyed fury be my conduct now.—
Now, Tybalt, take the 'villain' back again
That late thou gavest me, for Mercutio's soul
Is but a little way above our heads,
Staying for thine to keep him company.
Either thou or I, or both, must go with him.
(3.1.127-134)

Romeo reasserts his masculinity by fighting Tybalt. He also avenges the death of his best friend, which makes us wonder whether or not Juliet is the most important person in Romeo's life.

Act 3, Scene 3

Friar Laurence

FRIAR LAURENCE
Hold thy desperate hand!
Art thou a man? Thy form cries out thou art.

Thy tears are womanish; thy wild acts denote
The unreasonable fury of a beast.
Unseemly woman in a seeming man,
Or ill-beseeming beast in seeming both!
(3.3.118-123)

In *Romeo and Juliet*, boys don't cry. Here, the Friar calls Romeo a "womanish" wimp for crying and threatening suicide. Give the guy a break, okay? Not only has he been in and out of love for the past month, he's just found out that he's going to be exiled without even getting to make love to his thirteen-year-old wife. (Heavy sarcasm.)

The Nurse

NURSE
O, he is even in my mistress' case,
Just in her case. O woeful sympathy!
Piteous predicament! Even so lies she,
Blubbering and weeping, weeping and blubb'ring.—
Stand up, stand up. Stand an you be a man.
For Juliet's sake, for her sake, rise and stand.
(3.3.92-97)

Nice to know some things don't change (not): excessive "weeping and blubbering" was considered just as unmanly in the sixteenth century as it is today.

Act 3, Scene 5

Lord Capulet

CAPULET
Hang thee, young baggage, disobedient wretch!
I tell thee what: get thee to church o' Thursday,
Or never after look me in the face.
Speak not; reply not; do not answer me. (3.5.166-169)

Juliet's father seriously flips out when Juliet refuses to marry Paris and treats his daughter like a piece of property that he can just give away to another man (Paris).

So, what happened to his earlier stance that Juliet should marry for love, when she's ready?

When a school of literary criticism is still evolving, trying to make a definitive explanation of it can be a perilous undertaking. Feminist criticism, a case in point, is difficult to define because it has not yet been codified into a single critical perspective. Instead, its several shapes and directions vary from one country to another, even from one critic to another. The premise that unites those who call themselves feminist critics is the assumption that Western culture is fundamentally patriarchal, creating an imbalance of power that marginalizes women and their work. In the case of queer theory critics, whose work is also covered in this chapter, parallel concerns include heterosexual privilege and the marginalization of homosexuals and their work. The social structure that enforces the same gender and sexual norms for all, according to feminists and queer theorists, is reflected in religion, philosophy, economics, education—all aspects of the culture, including literature. They work to expose such ideology

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND Although the feminist movement stretches back into the nineteenth century, the modern attempt to look at literature through a feminist lens began to develop only in the early 1960s. Emerging alongside feminist criticism was a movement toward queer theory criticism, which reached a critical point by the 1980s, as the following overview explains. Feminism Feminism was a long time coming. For centuries, Western culture had operated on the assumption that women were inferior creatures. Leading thinkers, from Aristotle to Charles Darwin, reiterated that women were lesser beings, and one does not have to look hard to find comments from writers, theologians, and other public figures that disparage and degrade women. The Greek ecclesiast John Chrysostom (ca. AD 347–407) called women “a foe to friendship, an inescapable punishment, a necessary evil,” and

Ecclesiasticus, a book of the biblical apocrypha, states, “All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman.” The Roman theologian Tertullian (ca. AD 160–230) lectured to women that “the judgment of God upon your sex endures even today; and with it inevitably endures your position of criminal at the bar of justice. You are the gateway to the devil.” Even the Book of Genesis blames Eve for the loss of paradise. Revered writers of later ages have been equally ungenerous in their descriptions of the nature of women. Alexander Pope (1688–1744) asserted, “Most women have no character at all,” and John Keats (1795–1821) explained, “The opinion I have of the generality of women—who appear to me as children to whom I would rather give a sugar plum than my time—forms a barrier against matrimony which I rejoice in.” It is not surprising, given widespread acknowledgment of the inferiority of the female, that women too accepted their lesser status. Even the French writer Madame de Staël (1766–1817) is said to have commented, “I am glad that I am not a man, as I should be obliged to marry a woman.” When women did recognize their talents, they sometimes worked to conceal them. Jane Austen (1775–1817), for example, advised, “A woman, especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can.” Or as Mae West (1893–1980) put it, “Brains are an asset, if you hide them.” Women are the staple of jokes, too. As an example, James Thurber (1894–1961), an oft-quoted misogynist, once commented, “Woman’s place is in the wrong.” In the late eighteenth century, however, Mary Wollstonecraft took issue with the assumptions that allow people to make jokes and cause women to hide their creativity. In 1792 she published A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, a book in which she depicted women as an oppressed class regardless of social hierarchy. Her views were radical in a place and time that did not recognize women’s political or legal rights, offered them few opportunities for employment, and, if they married, gave their property to their husbands. Having experienced as a child the imbalance of power between her own mother and father and having observed as an

adult the indignities suffered by women of all classes, she recognized that they are born into powerless roles. As a result, Wollstonecraft asserted, women are forced to use manipulative methods to get what they want. She argued for women to be "duly prepared by education to be the companions of men" and called for the members of her sex to take charge of their lives by recognizing that their abilities were equal to those of men, to define their identities for themselves, and to carve out their own roles in society. She wrote, I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists—I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt…. I wish to shew that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex. Her stand was not welcomed by all. Horace Walpole, for example, called her a "hyena in petticoats," but Wollstonecraft's words were out, and they were impossible to ignore ever again. In 1929 another eloquent analysis of the position of women was published by Virginia Woolf, best known as a writer of lyrical and somewhat experimental novels. Called A Room of One's Own, the book questioned why women appear so seldom in history. Woolf pointed out that poems and stories are full of their depictions, but in real life they hardly seem to have existed. They are absent. In the chapter entitled "Shakespeare's Sister," she pondered what would have happened to a gifted female writer in the Renaissance. Without an adequate education or a room of her own, "whatever she had written," Woolf concluded, "would have been twisted and deformed, issuing from a strained and morbid imagination." Woolf went on to argue that if we [women] have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; if we escape a little from the common

sitting room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality; and the sky too, … when she [Shakespeare's sister] is born again she shall find it possible to live and write her poetry. Individuals like Wollstonecraft and Woolf stand out as eloquent spokespersons for women. Along with them are many others whose names are less well known but whose efforts have been important to the development of women's history, both social and literary. Some of that history has been traced by Elaine Showalter, who divided it into three phases: the feminine phase (1840–80), the 104

CHAPTER 6

feminist phase (1880–1920), and the female phase (1920–present). In the first, female writers imitated the literary tradition established by men, taking additional care to avoid offensive language or subject matter. Novelists such as Charlotte Brontë and Mary Ann Evans wrote in the forms and styles of recognized writers, all of whom were male. Sometimes female writers even used men's names (Currer Bell for Brontë and George Eliot for Evans, for example) to hide their female authorship. In the second phase, according to Showalter, women protested their lack of rights and worked to secure them. In the political realm, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and others pushed to secure equality under the law, and some of the more radical feminists envisioned separate female utopias. In the literary world, they decried the unjust depictions of women by male writers. The third phase, at its beginnings, concentrated on exploring the female experience in art and literature. For female writers, this meant turning to their own lives for subjects. It also meant that the delicacy of expression that had typified women's writing began to crumble as a new frankness regarding sexuality emerged. For feminist critics, it meant looking at the depiction of women in male texts in an effort to reveal the misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) lurking there. More recently they have turned

their attention to an examination of works by female writers. These latest efforts Showalter refers to as gynocriticism, a movement that examines the distinctive characteristics of the female experience, in contrast to earlier methods that explained the female by using male models. During the third period that Showalter identified, a host of important spokespersons have raised public awareness of issues surrounding women's rights. Simone de Beauvoir in The Second Sex (1949) argued that French culture, and Western societies in general, are patriarchal. In those societies, the males define what it means to be human. Lacking her own history, the female is always secondary or nonexistent. Beauvoir believed that women are not born inferior but rather are made to be so. She called for women to break out of being the "other" and to realize their possibilities. Betty Friedan shocked some and cheered others with her attack on the image of the happy, mid-twentieth-century, American, suburban housewife and mother in The Feminine Mystique (1963). By the next decade, feminists were taking their models from other social protests, such as the civil rights movement. Kate Millett, in Sexual Politics (1970), objected to the repressive stereotyping of women by probing the differences between biological (sexual) and cultural (gender) identities. Millet also pointed out that power in both public and domestic life is held by males, and literature is a record of the collective consciousness of patriarchy. That is, much literature is the record of a man speaking to other men, not directly to women. At about the same time, Germaine Greer documented images of women in popular culture and literature in The Female Eunuch (1970) in an attempt to free women from their mental dependence on the images presented by these sources. Showalter acknowledges that today there is no single strand of feminism or feminist criticism, no single feminist approach to the study of literature, but there do seem to be some similarities among feminists in particular countries. American feminism, which has its stronghold in academia, has worked to add texts by female writers to the canon. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, authors of The

Madwoman in the Attic (1979), have been influential in American feminist criticism, calling for a recognition that male writers have too long stereotyped women as either "the angel in the house" (the woman who lives to care for her husband) or "the madwoman in the attic" (the woman who chooses not to be the angel). They call for writing by women, even a woman's sentence with linguistic qualities of its own, that will more accurately capture the complexity of women's lives and nature. Showalter points out that French feminists are primarily psychoanalytic. For their theoretical basis, they have turned to their fellow countryman Jacques Lacan. They are, consequently, concerned with language, particularly with how women in the Symbolic Order (a phase of development) are socialized into accepting the language and Law of the Father and are thereby made inferior (see Chapter 4). Hélène Cixous goes so far as to assert that there is a particular kind of writing by women, which she calls l'écriture féminine, that is characterized by non-linear texts and cyclical writing that is the antithesis of phallocentric writing. She urges women to write themselves out of the linear system of writing and thinking devised by men for men. The British feminists, according to Showalter, generally take a Marxist position. Protesting the exploitation of women in life and literature, which they view as connected by virtue of being parts of the material world, British feminist critics work to change the economic and social status of women. They analyze relationships between gender and class, showing how power structures, which are male dominated, influence society and oppress women. Like Marxists in general, they see literature as a tool by which society itself can be reformed. All three groups are gynocentric, trying to find ways to define the female experience, expose patriarchy, and save women from being the other. Those involved with literature—critics and writers—try to expand the canon to include female writers and to correct inaccurate depictions of women in the works of male writers. Interest in such topics has led to increased notice of works written by females who had been ignored or forgotten but whose texts deserve examination. The

Awakening, by Kate Chopin, is a case in point. Rediscovered in the 1960s, it became a popular and critical success more than sixty years after its initial publication. The growing strength of the feminist movement has also led to the establishment of women's studies programs, further fueling the interest in gender studies, which question the qualities of femininity and masculinity, and in feminist literary criticism. Such programs ask questions about the nature of the female imagination and female literary history. What, after all, is a female aesthetic? Do women use language in ways that are different from those of men? Do women have a different pattern of reasoning? Do they see the world in a different way? Several significant studies have tried to answer such questions. They do not all agree, but in general, they have challenged assumptions about how males and females use language, view reality, solve problems, and make judgments. all suggest that women and men have different conceptions of self and different modes of interaction with others. Some of the findings call for recognition of the differences, because ignoring them inevitably leads to a suppression of women's ways of understanding and acting. Nancy Chodorow, for example, argued in The Reproduction of Mothering that girls and boys develop a different concept of self because of different relationships with the mother, the primary parent in the home. Girls maintain an ongoing gender role identification with the mother from the beginning, but boys, in addition to dealing with an Oedipal attachment, give up their primary identification with her. The result is that men tend to deny relationships, whereas women remain relational. In another study, Carol Gilligan focused on differences in how males and females talk about moral problems. Her interest in the subject grew out of her objections to the theories of psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg regarding the development of moral reasoning, which he believed to be the basis for ethical behavior. Expanding the theories of Jean Piaget by examining the stages of development beyond the ages first studied, Kohlberg concluded that the process of moral development can be observed in six stages, which

are broken into three levels, each responding better to moral dilemmas than the last. His research also showed that girls, on average, reach a lower level of moral development than do boys. Gilligan took issue with Kohlberg's findings in her book In a Different Voice by objecting to his research methods. As she pointed out, the participants in Kohlberg's basic study were all male, thereby forming a false standard of measurement. She also noted that the scoring method Kohlberg used tended to favor a principled way of reasoning that is more common to boys, over moral argumentation concentrating on human relationships, which is more natural to girls. Gilligan's conclusions were that men are more likely to see morality as a matter of rights and rules to be dealt with by formal reasoning. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to deal with moral issues contextually. That is, instead of applying "blind justice" provided by abstract laws and universal principles, they recognize that moral choice must be determined from the particular experiences of the participants. Conflicting responsibilities are to be resolved in a narrative, consensual manner. Such ideas eventually led to Gilligan being known as the founder of "difference feminism," because unlike some feminists, she acknowledged that significant differences exist between men and women— specifically, that men think in terms of rules and justice, whereas women are more likely to think in terms of caring and relationships. More recently, Gilligan worked with Nora Lyons to examine the implications of self-definition, finding that many more women than men define themselves in terms of their relationships and connections to others. Another feminist writer, Robin Lakoff, has argued that women's language is inferior to that of men. She has pointed out its patterns of weakness, uncertainty, and triviality. She went on to assert that women should adopt the stronger male utterance if they wish to achieve equality. A fourth study of significance comes from Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule.

Women's Ways of Knowing, it is concerned with women's intellectual development. Recognizing that male experience has served as the model in defining the processes of intellectual maturation, the authors argue that the ways of knowing that women value "have been neglected and denigrated by the dominant intellectual ethos of our time." That is, "thinking" has traditionally been defined as the mental processes attributed primarily to men—processes such as abstract reasoning, the scientific

method, and impersonal judgments. Belenky et al. aver that this kind of thinking does not come naturally to many women, who instead are more comfortable with personal and interpersonal ways of knowing. They are more likely to value "connection over separation, understanding and acceptance over assessment, and collaboration over debate." Based on interviews with 135 women from a variety of backgrounds and ages, the study found that women develop intellectually as they find their voice, as they move from silence (in which they take their identification from external authorities) to subjective knowledge (when they turn away from others but still lack a public voice) and then to constructed knowledge (when they integrate their own intuitive knowledge with what they have learned from others). Despite (or perhaps because of) such studies, members of the feminist movement today, as well as the critics, male and female, who make its principles and methods the basis of their critical approach to literature, are not yet in complete agreement about what those principles and methods are. In fact, there are currently many different forms of feminism and many different kinds of feminist critics, partly because of their tendency to borrow from other social and literary movements—a practice that has both enriched and complicated their work. As a result, they now find themselves the inheritors of several decades of evolution that has led to significant differences, and even some disagreements, among them. Minority feminists—women of color and lesbians, for example—do not always align themselves with what they see as a primarily white, middle-class movement that has

historically marginalized them. Their exclusion is ironic, given that their victimization has been greater than that of their white counterparts. Not only has history taken less notice of them than it has of white women, but literature too has generally overlooked them, at least until recently. Compounding their grievances is the fact that they have more than a single battle to fight. The African American feminist critic, for example, finds herself pressured by two forces of oppression: racism and sexism. The two are bound together in her experience, but she does not find that circumstance represented by mainstream feminism, which is focused only on sexism. The same situation is true for the poor, the aged, and other women who find themselves without access to power, leaving them outside the movement as it has developed with leadership vested in educated—and relatively affluent—white women. The response of minority feminist critics is therefore likely to be more political than that of white critics. And when one makes reference to feminism as a worldwide movement, the situation becomes even more complex, because the roles and power of women in different countries vary widely. A feminist living and working in Los Angeles is likely to have a very different life from that of a mother of five in Chad or Sudan, so how can there be "sisterhood"?

The political edge found among minority feminist critics, the Marxist feminists, and others has not been welcomed by everyone. Some complain that extreme positions regarding social policy ultimately cause a reader to ignore the literary text. They object that a radical stance diverts the critic from the main task at hand, which is to pay attention to the aesthetics of literature, not to impose a political agenda on it. Such comments are formalist in nature, for they urge the reader to see the work as an autonomous entity with its own rules of being. It is an approach that lies at a great distance from the methods of those who would use literature as a tool of social protest and reform. The definition of feminist criticism was also destabilized by the introduction of deconstruction, which, since the middle 1970s, has been a disruptive and

transformative way of thinking about what it means to be male or female (see Chapter 8). When the definition plays with the reversal of those binaries, it also overturns all the other binary oppositions that are related to them: rational/emotional, active/passive, objective/subjective. The result is that it complicates what we mean when we refer to sexual identity. It forces us to ask, What do we mean when we describe someone as masculine or feminine? (Dobe)

Studies of the Female Experience The interest of some feminists in probing the unique nature of the female personality and experience has led the critics and writers among them to try to identify a specifically female tradition of literature. Such explorations have been particularly interesting to French feminists, who have found in Lacan's extensions of Freudian theory a basis for resisting the idea of a stable "masculine" authority or truth. Rejecting the idea of a male norm, against which women are seen as secondary and derivative, they call for a recognition of women's abilities that goes beyond the traditional binary oppositions, such as male/female and the parallel oppositions of active/passive and intellectual/emotional. Searching for the essence of feminine style in literature, they examine female images in the works of female writers and the elements thought to be typical of l'écriture féminine, such as blanks, unfinished sentences, silences, and exclamations. Early female images and goddesses become important as symbols of the power of women to resist and overcome male oppression. Images of motherhood are significant too, for childbearing and rearing involve power and creation. Of course, this approach runs the risk of creating female chauvinists who argue for a special, superior (Dobe)

FEMINIST CRITICISM gender. It also risks creating a ghetto in which women's writing stands separate from the male tradition and is thereby weakened. One such critic who has been influenced by Lacan is Hélène Cixous, who in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976) explores the nature

of the female unconscious and issues a call for women to put their bodies into their writing. Connecting female writing with Lacan's Real Order, a prelinguistic phase of development characterized by oneness between the child and the mother, she sees women's writing as coming from a primeval space that is free of the elements of Lacan's Symbolic Order, such as the Law of the Father (see Chapter 4). In it, the Voice of the Mother becomes the source of feminine power and writing. Cixous's visionary perspective, which calls upon women to invent their own language, possibly heads toward the terminal marginalization of women's writing, despite the passion with which it is put forth. Since Lacan, however, some of these feminists have been able to accept the "phallus" as a symbolic concept, using it as it once was used in ancient fertility cults. From him they take the position that males and females alike lack the wholeness of sexuality of full presence, leaving both with a yearning that can never be filled. Abigail Adams would not have been able to think of herself in such terms, but throughout her letters it is clear that she looks at life around her and at her own responsibilities in a way that John does not. She is the nurturing caretaker of the family, fulfilling the expected, stereotypical female role. She offers, for example, to copy and send the instructions for the "proportions of the various sorts of powder fit for cannon, small-arms, and pistols" if it would be useful to John. However, Abigail is more than just a helpmate or facilitator. She is a thinking individual, one who reverses the rational/irrational binary. John engages in a serious conversation with her about "Dunmore," and it is clear that he values her intellectual grasp of the situation. Her accounts of the work she does to maintain the household—making clothes, soap, and perhaps saltpeter—are evidence of the reversal of the active/passive binary often invoked in regard to male/female. She is a hardworking, involved, industrious woman, without whose efforts and energies the family, and by extension the society, could not survive. Rhetorically, as noted in the discussion of studies of power, Abigail is careful to write what is likely to be pleasing to John. She inquires about his work,

reiterates the rightness of the cause for which he is fighting, speaks at length about personal matters, and reveals her own feelings. Her voice is not that of her husband, even when she agrees with his sentiments. It is a distinctly female voice full of concern for others that comes from a particularly personal perspective. To study the nature of the female personality and experience in literature, you can begin by asking the following questions: ■ Where do characters speak with mannerisms that seem to be characteristically female, such as unfinished sentences, silences, exclamations?.. ■ Does the text include images of motherhood or references to goddesses that suggest creativity and power? ■ Do you find the female characters conforming to expected norms? Are they nurturing, giving, passive, emotional? ■ Are there reversals of the expected norms? Do some female characters take on what are considered to be masculine characteristics? ■ According to this work, what does it mean to be female?