

# Around 1985: Australian Feminist Literary Criticism and its 'Foreign Bodies'

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As a set of notes towards a history of the reception of feminist theories in Australian literary studies in the decades since the 1960s, this paper suggests a story that differs from others, both in its relationship to traditional or nationalist Australian literary criticism, and in its relationship to those other theoretical incursions upon the ideologies and practices of the formerly dominant nationalist critical mode. Feminist work shapes and marks out its own field, which of course refers to and contests the nationalist traditions while at the same time incorporating into its own politics and emergent practices the newer theoretical discourses that are beginning to influence Australian literary studies from around the early 1970s. In so far as it can be seen as constructing its own radical territory, one with the potential, or aim, to revolutionise Australian literary studies of whatever persuasion, feminist literary criticism may be understood as a symptomatic site of influence in a contemporary history of literary critical practices in Australia. It is symptomatic in several ways: because of its participation in and adoption of 'new' theory; because of its capacity for praxis, for potential or actual transformation of 'other' critical practices; through its connectedness with the politics of social change; and I think because of the strong sense in the beginnings of this feminist critical theory and practice in Australia of its being involved in a much wider – an international – politics and necessarily but not uncritically taking part in an Euro-American intellectual exchange. It seems to me that there is less ambiguity in the use of the new theoretical discourses, less of the defensiveness or hostility or qualified or enthusiastic adoption that variously characterise their Australian reception, within feminisms than within the already established traditions of Australian literary criticism.

I want to develop some of these ideas through an examination of the first decade of the publication of *Hecate* (1975–85/6), the longest running journal of women's scholarship in Australia, to identify the beginnings of the story of Australian feminist criticism. This decade is also marked by three important publications; Drusilla Modjeska's *Exiles at Home* (1981), Shirley Walker's *Who Is She?* (1983) and Carole Ferrier's *Gender, Politics and Fiction* (1985). This new concentration of publishing in different areas of feminist criticism including the cultural history of gender and writing indicates a new interest in these areas in mainstream publishing, which matches their increasing institutional acceptance after 1975. In my story,

the decade is framed by two publications of male academics; the first a 1974 article by Ian Reid, the second a 1984 book by K.K. Ruthven.

Late in 1974, *Southern Review* (which began publication in 1963 as 'an Australian Journal of Literary Studies') published an article by Ian Reid, then at the University of Adelaide, titled "The Woman Problem" in some Australian and New Zealand novels'. This became one of the chapters in Reid's book *Fiction and the Depression in Australia and New Zealand* published in 1975. Reid refers almost at once to the negative connotations of his title and distances himself from them: 'the woman problem' is what 'one disparaging male writer called it' (187). He is concerned with a group of mid- to late-thirties novels by Australian or New Zealand women writers, Christina Stead, Robin Hyde, Dymphna Cusack, Kylie Tennant and Eleanor Dark. All the work presents 'problems of female self-definition in a male-oriented society' (187). Finding that the novels share an incapacity to engage fully with 'the woman problem', and that they are 'less than thoroughgoing in their analysis of sexual politics' (201), Reid concludes that in his view, and excepting Christina Stead, this writing is politically half-hearted. Reid identifies this as an effect of the sociopolitical environment in which 'men were still virtually dictating the terms of debate [of the woman problem]' (201) so that women could only react. Yet despite Reid's recognition of the concerns of a group of women writers about women's issues, he himself has little resource to a feminist critical language or perspective. The 'problem' remains for him the writers' problem, and when he says that 'it was left to a later generation to examine sexual politics as the *man* problem' (202), he fails to recognise that his too is a man problem.

Nevertheless, this is an important article in many ways: it is one of the earliest critical essays published in Australia using Australian women's texts to mount an argument about the textualisation of issues to do with women's lives and experience. But it stands uneasily on the edges of 'feminist literary criticism', because of 'the man problem'. The context of Reid's article is also interesting. *Southern Review's* aim was to develop an awareness of 'foreign' theory for its Australian readers and to overcome what it saw as the critical chauvinism that limited the growth of theory in Australian literary and cultural studies. Reid's piece, however, draws on work by Australian literary critics and sociologists and on the systems of thought developed by Nietzsche and Darwin that form an intellectual context for *For Love Alone*, which provides his main focus. The article is thus situated in a journal that exists outside the parameters recognised at that time by conventional or traditional Australian literary studies, yet it is marked by its lack of 'foreign theory' and by its attention to an already established Australian critical context for the works he discusses. Not acceptable perhaps to the established publishing outlets for articles of literary criticism in Australia, Reid's article is acceptable to *Southern Review*, yet his theorising is homegrown. In addition, his mode of analysis in relation to the socio-political contexts in which he situates the works he examines is one that has been widely used in Australian literary studies, and this methodology would not have been out of place in an early issue of *Hecate*.

Subtitled 'A Women's Interdisciplinary Journal', *Hecate* is published biannually. Its first issue came out early in 1975: it was International Women's Year: the year Anne Summers' feminist history of Australian women's lives, *Damned Whores and God's Police*, was published: in 1975 the fourth issue of *Meanjin* had a feminist focus, and the American women's studies journal *Signs* was first published. *Hecate* describes itself as 'interested in all material relating to women', and is distinguished by its consistent editorship (Carole Ferrier was its founding editor and remains in that position while Bronwen Levy became assistant editor in the early 1980s) and its challenging and topical editorials. They form a strongly political and material as well as intellectual context for the journal's content, critical articles from a range of disciplines, major review articles of contemporary feminist publications, fiction and poetry. Written by and for 'women activists', the editorials identify and confront social, pedagogical and theoretical issues from *Hecate's* particular ideological position; it is the voice of 'feminists and socialists' (1.1, 1975).

The editorials immediately establish the journal's aim, to develop strategies to liberate women from the 'dead weight of oppression' of a capitalist, sexist society, and its function, to facilitate and share knowledges on women through 'interdisciplinary crossfertilization' and to provide a site for 'the creative expressions of a new consciousness' (1.1, 1975). For *Hecate*, women's studies is 'an integral part of [the women's] ... movement' (1.2, 1975), and academic feminist theory and writing can participate in the struggle against women's oppression by providing explanatory structures for the issues that are part of that struggle. Editorials also raise and respond to significant moments in feminist criticism and politics, noting in 1979 a weakening of the women's movement; in 1980 asking 'is a cross-class women's movement an option?' (6.2) and urging the need to transform the middle class nature of the women's movement; in 1982 raising the question of the 'gap between women's liberation and black oppression'. Only with 'a transformation of the economic base of Australian society' will 'the conditions for the removal of racism and sexism be achieved for all of us' (8.2). Dual imperatives are represented in *Hecate's* editorials as they strive to assert the significance of feminist theoretical perspectives and at the same time claim a place for *Hecate* in the liberation movement. The tensions between these imperatives indicate an ongoing struggle for the journal that replicates a struggle within academic feminisms in the seventies. As *Hecate* tries to draw together the public arena of women's issues and politics and the academic arena of feminist theory it produces its own conflicted field of allegiances.

Feminist literary criticism in early issues of *Hecate* tends to focus on major, canonical writers. Articles by Susan Higgins, 'The Suffragettes in Fiction' and Carole Ferrier, 'The Death of the Family in Some Novels by Women of the Forties and Fifties' (2.2, 1976) both develop what was then a radical methodology, in which literature is the representation of a social reality in which class and gender structure power and inequality, but they refer to well established writers, E.M. Forster, Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence; Christina Stead, Doris Lessing, Sylvia Plath, Janet Frame and Simone de Beauvoir. This tendency supports the view that in order to establish an institutional place for itself, feminist criticism had to use

works that were already established as central to literary studies. At the same time, *Hecate* displays an early interest in issues of lesbian sexuality and consciousness in literature, an area of critical enquiry well outside traditional literary studies at this time.

By the early eighties, feminist critics are publishing in *Hecate* on less canonical texts. An article on Lesbia Harford and Marie Pitt as 'Forgotten Poets' argues that women writers in the period between the two world wars were disregarded (8:1, 1982). Carole Ferrier's review of Drusilla Modjeska's *Exiles at Home* as a pioneering, interdisciplinary work that 'should open up the whole history of women's literary production in Australia' (77) is a covert recognition that such work signals an important shift in feminist criticism from the search for literary images of women to the recovery of the work of women writers and revisions of Australian literary history. In 'What does Woman Mean? Reading, Writing and Reproduction', Sneja Gunew presages another shift from one kind of feminist work to another, declaring the need to replace work on women in writing or women and writing with an investigation of 'the involved process whereby meaning is constructed' (111). She uses three Australian texts, *Woman of the Future*, *Tracks* and *The Watch Tower* to examine 'relationships between concepts of the feminine and representation', assess strategies 'for constructing female reading positions, both as they are inscribed within a text ... and how they may be taken up outside a text' (111), and analyse structures of female desire in the texts. Gunew identifies language and representation, textualisation and reader positioning as critical sites for feminist analysis.

In the same issue but using different theoretical paradigms for a different reading of Elizabeth Harrower's *The Watch Tower*, Frances McInherney moves from Anne Summers' ideas to those of Elaine Showalter and finally identifies a basic conflict in Harrower's work between the feminist politics of her representations of women, showing their 'degradation, isolation and emotional impoverishment' (132) and the nationalist politics of those Australian writers of whom Harrower was one, who in the 1960s wished for 'national awakening' yet looked outside Australia for 'enlightenment, civilisation and intellectual amelioration' (132/33). Two articles by Kay Schaffer around this time on Katharine Susannah Prichard suggest poststructuralist approaches to her work that challenge the trend in Prichard criticism based on an assumption of the reflective relationship between writer and work. By 1985 a major section on 'Women's Writing: Its Critical Reception' includes essays by Bronwen Levy who argues for the need to examine and analyse the modes and politics of production and their effects on women's texts; Elizabeth Perkins whose deconstructive reading of Thea Astley's *A Kindness Cup* reads the novel 'as a 'feminine' phenomenon which can only be understood in terms of a 'feminine' awareness struggling to orientate itself in a masculinist society' (13), and Carole Ferrier writing on Jean Devanny, whose fiction demands 'new manners of apprehension' (19) from those currently available, even within feminist literary criticism. In the space of a few issues, a pluralist feminist critical practice is evident in a range of work using a range of theories and politics.

*Hecate's* position as a journal committed to criticism always based in or relevant

to the social and political realities of women's lives would seem to preclude an interest in what is often understood as the abstraction of French feminisms. However, from the late seventies a series of articles explore the significance of French feminist theories and theorists. Writing in 1979 on 'Aspects of Current French Feminist Literary Criticism', Meaghan Morris argues for the applicability of such practices of feminist criticism for their capacity to 'contribute ... to the active contestation of patriarchal culture'. She notes the beginnings of an exchange of ideas between English-speaking feminists and those in Europe with their very different 'experiences and directions' in two recent *Signs* articles (so *Hecate* is right up to date). Morris's discussion of these differences, and of the ways that the feminine has been conceptualised within French literary criticism and philosophy, includes a plea for a more adventurous approach to theoretical models by Australian feminist critics at a time when, she notes, shifts are taking place in the field of literary criticism in Australia. The current 'transformation of critical languages' according to Morris 'should be to our [feminist critics'] advantage' (69). That approach would include a careful consideration of the linguistic and political effects of binary oppositions and a history of the textual problematisation of women. To be an effective 'reading tactic', feminist analysis must seek out a 'history of the discursive subjects projected by women writers, and the enunciative struggles within which they function' (72). In this way, French feminisms are brought into practical, political engagement with Australian cultural discourses within which the inscription of the feminine functions to secure a traditional hierarchy of sexual difference.

This article and others that follow provide a rich commentary on the intersections between French feminist theories and Australian feminist criticism. *Hecate* marked the watershed publication for anglophone feminist literary criticism of *New French Feminisms* (1980), a set of translations of French feminist texts with an American introduction, by publishing three related responses; a critique by Rosi Braidotti and Jane Weinstock, followed by 'an alternative view ... of the French feminist movement' to that of *New French Feminisms* by Anna Gibbs and a commentary by Nancy Huston. Gibbs's brief introduction to this 'ensemble of texts' establishes them in an already existing Australian context of feminist debate. That is, there are no concessions to an audience not aware of this body of theory. Gibbs goes on to identify the questions that this publication crystallises, those 'of cultural importation and exportation, and of the difficulties surrounding both literal and figurative translation'. Characterising an Australian reception of cultural production from outside as often uncritical, Gibbs warns of the necessity of recognising the 'specificity of our own feminist context' (24), raising these as complex issues which will have to be addressed by feminist scholars. At the same time, these responses assume a level of dialogue and critical awareness among Australian feminist scholars, however tentative, that belies the tiny, scattered nature of that field and *Hecate* provides a sympathetic context for that dialogue around those ideas and their implications for Australian feminist pedagogy and scholarship.

Meaghan Morris uses Gibbs's prefatory remarks to the debate around *New French Feminisms* (in a *Foreign Bodies* article on what she terms 'Import Rhetoric') to iden-

Why the complicated nature of the relationship between areas of Australian feminist criticism and its 'foreign' body. Such identifications occur, for Morris, in the series of shifts Gibbs uses, of time (between past and present), place (Australia and Paris), speaking position ('English-speaking feminists' and 'we' working in Australia) that indicate for her a level of anxiety in the use of 'foreign' rhetoric, in relation both to the problem of the Australian audience and to the problem of enunciation, of who speaks for and to whom in this context? A two-part essay by Sneja Gunew and Louise Adler in *Hecate* illuminates the possibilities for an Australian feminist criticism, ones that lie between politicising a homegrown critical practice – the empiricism of the 'method' of Anglo-Saxon critical theory and practice – and adapting 'foreign theory' – the 'madness' of French feminisms. Each section deals with one area of 'difference'; Gunew with the difference of women, migrants, the avant-garde; Adler with the possibility of speaking the difference of women's writing, or of writing 'woman', within the difference that French methodologies make.

In the following issue, an editorial comment on the disagreement between radical feminists and social revolutionaries over whether men are responsible for women's oppression, or whether it occurs in language, leads to *Hecate's* questioning of what is referred to as the 'whole French critical enterprise' (8.1, 1982). While this 'enterprise' is not irrelevant, it does 'need to be informed much more centrally by a consideration of class and economic questions'. Readers are warned to 'avoid the diversionary directions into which much contemporary theory has fallen'. This intervention illustrates the journal's interactive style; it does not exclude itself from internal debates and there is a level of self-referentiality across the issues of the journal. In an exploration in this issue of the relevance of bodies of theory to Australian literary studies, Bronwen Levy draws away from the discussions over French feminisms to analyse the work of an Anglo-American group of theorists, Annette Kolodny, Elaine Showalter and Mary Jacobus, by then widely known and used in Australian literary criticism. This is prompted by a concern both with the relationship of theory to feminist politics and with the too easy incorporation in some recent Australian feminist work of such theory. For Levy the situation in Australian feminist criticism, where the 'material available for research has been barely touched, [and] the first book-length studies are only just appearing' provides the perfect opportunity for Australian critics 'to observe and learn from the problematic relationship between ideology and methodology that is evident in much of the [Anglo-American] feminist criticism published to date' (97) and construct their own critical practice. This should include attention to 'evidence of the material conditions of the text's gendered producer ...', which will be found in texts 'so long as a class-based and sexist organisation of society exists' (109).

One of *Hecate's* important attributes is its capacity to act as a forum for debate, indeed, its desire is to provoke debate. An early editorial ends with an exhortation to its readers: 'We want to have more correspondence, more reviews and more debates in HECATE' (5:1, 1979). An important debate in a history of feminist literary criticism in Australia that takes place over two issues of the journal is centred around the publication of the first and to date the only Australian survey of

the field, K. K. Ruthven's *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction* (1984). In a three-part review of the book, Sneja Gunew, Philippa Rothfield and Louise Johnson argue that Ruthven's position, that feminist criticism is 'just one more way of talking about books' (Ruthven 8), is patronisingly reductive of its politics, positions it falsely as necessarily objective or metatheoretical, and constrains it as a pedagogy that must conform to the rigours of academic scholarship. In his reply, Ruthven claims that literary criticism is a rhetorical not a political activity, therefore feminist literary criticism must also be a rhetoric. Ruthven parodies his reviewers' objection to his claim that literary criticism is a metacriticism beyond politics, and to his assertion that feminist literary criticism is no different from other types of literary criticism, by speaking of himself in the third person, writing '[H]e concedes that the politics of feminist criticism are interventionist but chooses to focus attention on the rhetorical strategies used to effect such an intervention' (181). 'If asked to classify Ruthven's text', he concludes, 'I would call it "neoliberal humanist"' (183). It is precisely this separation of rhetoric and politics that Ruthven's feminist reviewers object to, as Bronwen Levy points out in an article that takes in both Ruthven's book and his response to its review. 'Ruthven wants to maintain his professorial authority to judge the activities of feminist critics', Levy writes, 'while simultaneously desiring his activities to be accepted on an equal basis by those whose work he describes' (184). Levy sets up two signposts to a future for feminist criticism. First, access to cultural studies will enable feminisms to theorise and analyse questions of class and race, and second, the 'need to avoid [institutional] co-option should continue to be a key issue for feminists at the level of theory and of practice' (189).

In this exchange between feminist critics and Ruthven, it is possible to read all the tensions that accompanied the entry of feminist literary theory into academic institutions. Levy recognises that the publication of a book like *Feminist Literary Criticism* by a respected male professor of English then at Adelaide University with an impeccable background in traditional eighteenth century literature signals this as a moment of institutional acceptance for Australian feminist literary criticism. Since feminist literary theories had first been used in Australia, a struggle internal to feminist critical practice had centred around the potential compromise that adopting an institutional position posed for the radical politics of feminist thought. Such a moment of acceptance thus threatened Australian feminist critical thought, not only with the possibility of co-option within traditional modes of literary theory and critical practice but also with a future in which it could indeed become 'just another way of talking about books'. It is significant that Levy chooses cultural studies as the field towards which feminist literary criticism should turn to learn new ways of thinking. Its radical 'newness' poses less threats to the political autonomy of feminist criticism than do traditional Australian literary studies. This shift, she intimates, will save feminist literary studies from the threat of co-option, incorporation and deradicalisation, those areas of anxiety that are necessarily central to a theoretical practice that defines itself apart from all others, and that have marked *Hecate's* own story of the beginnings of Australian feminist theory and practice.

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