

American Drama, Feminist Discourse, and Dramatic Form: In Defense of Critical Pluralism

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As a graduate student in 1979, I announced my intention to write a dissertation on American drama. One respected teacher, a distinguished professor of American literature, offered this discouraging reply: "Well, that will be pretty difficult to do. Unless you want to write on Eugene O'Neill, there really isn't any American drama."

Clearly my professor had a distinct idea of what constituted American drama. His response indicated a value judgment based on traditional principles of canon structuring, a system of judgment that we now recognize as ideological, despite traditional canon makers' claims to objectivity, universality, and unassailable aesthetic standards. In my professor's mind, O'Neill was a "great figure" and therefore worthy of study.

Such value judgments, however, are inevitably subjective as well as ideological. With a sweeping implication that only O'Neill had withstood the test of time, my professor was able to reject as unworthy of my attention everything new and vital in American theatre at the time, from feminist collectives to regional theatres to the current crop of New York plays. (In 1979 those unworthy New York productions included new plays by Christopher Durang, Tina Howe, David Mamet, Marsha Norman, Bernard Pomeranz, Sam Shepard, Martin Sherman, Tennessee Williams, and Lanford Wilson.) My professor's more personal idiosyncrasy appears in his exclusion of other well-established American playwrights, like Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, who in 1979 were about to make their first appearance in the ultimate guidebook to canonical stature, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*.

On that day in 1979 and in the subsequent research that I stubbornly completed for my dissertation on American drama, I learned something important about the study of American drama: it had fallen through the cracks between the traditional categories of literary exploration. Americanists focused primarily on

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fiction, poetry, and autobiography; drama theorists centered their attention on the more innovative European theatre; theatre historians concentrated on stage history rather than play texts. By relying on predetermined categories of study that are prescriptive, exclusionary, subjective—and therefore ideological, although the ideology disguised itself as shared assumption—American literary scholars had blinded themselves to the vitality and diversity of American drama.

Since finishing that dissertation on American drama, I have focused my studies increasingly on feminist literary theory and feminist drama. There, at least, the ideology is clearly stated and recognized as such; the political is not a hidden agenda. Yet in the wealth of new material on feminist drama that has appeared in the last few years, I sometimes see patterns of thinking that are suspiciously similar to those of my curmudgeonly professor. In an attempt to define feminist dramatic praxis, many of us are following in the oversized footsteps as our academic forefathers (and I mean "fathers"): we all too often create definitions that are not only subjective (a quality that we have come to accept as inevitable) but also prescriptive and exclusionary.

Such prescriptive criticism can have a number of deleterious effects on feminist dramatists and critics. When we reproduce the limitations of the traditionally male-dominated theatre world within a feminist context, we disempower feminist playwrights rather than help to make them known. We also cause unnecessary divisiveness among feminist drama theorists and scholars, who begin to argue against certain feminist practices as a way of promoting their own theories. As a result, many exciting feminist efforts—dramatic, theoretical, historical, critical—are in danger of falling into those same gaps that swallowed up most of American drama for my professor and others like him.

This is not to say, of course, that controversy should be discouraged. On the contrary, if we keep in mind that different versions of feminism can all offer something valuable to the study of feminist drama, a critique of the benefits and dangers of each version can only broaden the scope of feminist inquiry and refine the methods available to it. A brief survey of some current trends in feminist dramatic theory will illustrate the controversies within the field, the lamentable tendency to prescriptiveness, and, I hope, the value of maintaining a well-informed pluralism in approaching feminist drama. For while each approach to the study of feminist drama contains certain built-in limitations, each one also clarifies some important underlying premises of feminism and provides valuable strategies for feminist analyses of drama and theatre.

The Autonomous Woman

The initial difficulty one faces in discussing feminist drama—and the source of much of the controversy within feminist critical activity—is in defining exactly what feminist drama is. For a number of playwrights and critics, the content of a play alone can qualify it as feminist. For some, like playwright Megan Terry, the creation of powerful, autonomous women characters is enough (288); Karen Malpede likewise defines feminist theatre by its concern for "women *surviving* and creating new and human communities out of the wreckage of the past" (Natalle 41). For scholar Janet Brown, "When woman's struggle for autonomy is a play's central rhetorical motive, that play can be considered a feminist drama" (1).

Placing woman at the center of art or literature, as such content-based definitions of feminist drama do, is obviously one important project of feminist criticism. Yet focusing exclusively on woman as dramatic protagonist oversimplifies the problem of defining feminist drama, as many feminist drama critics have observed. Susan Bassnett-McGuire, for example, points out that plays about autonomous women sometimes mirror the paradigm of the "great man," which is by nature both sexist and elitist (449-53). And as Michelene Wandor has noted, a play can be written by a woman, focus on women's experiences, have an all-female cast, and still fail to challenge the anti-feminist notions of biological determinism, cultural inferiority, and gender-based oppression (131).

The dangers attendant on describing all such woman-centered plays as feminist have been well illustrated by the critical response to Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* (1989). The play documents the career of feminist art historian Heidi Holland, from her teenage anxieties to her adult life as feminist activist, Columbia professor of Women's Art, and published author. Central to Heidi's experience are her lifelong friendships, particularly her relationship with her college lover Scoop, who marries sweet, supportive Lisa so he won't have to compete with Heidi for "Self-fulfillment. Self-determination. Self-exaggeration" (56). Scoop thus defends his choice of Lisa over Heidi and predicts a life of unhappiness for Heidi.

Scoop's prediction is fulfilled in Heidi's adult experience, as she finds herself lonely, unfulfilled by her career, and jealous of women with husbands and families. Near the end of the play, Heidi is called upon to deliver a speech entitled "Women, Where Are We Going?" at a luncheon for alumnae of the girls' school she once attended. Depressed and unprepared, Heidi recounts her recent experience in her aerobics class, describing her jealousy of her classmates, her

simultaneous feelings of worthlessness and superiority, and her frustration with her own life:

I don't blame the ladies in the locker room for how I feel. I don't blame any of us. We're all concerned, intelligent, good women. (Pause) It's just that I feel stranded. And I thought the whole point was that we wouldn't feel stranded. I thought the point was we were all in this together. (95)

The play ends as Heidi finds a solution to her feelings of isolation: she adopts a child, dreaming that her daughter may one day inhabit a world where no man will tell her "it's either/or, baby" and in which "she'll never think she's worthless unless he lets her have it all" (116).

Wasserstein's dramatization of Heidi's search for self-actualization clearly qualifies as an "autonomous woman" play. Yet the work is actually anti-feminist in a number of its themes: it trivializes certain aspects of the women's movement (such as the comic consciousness-raising group depicted in Act I), devalues personal accomplishment (such as Heidi's Fulbright grant or her book on women artists), and glorifies motherhood as the only path to complete fulfillment. Further, Heidi herself is primarily a passive observer of others' lives rather than a dynamic shaper of her own, as is evident when she permits her male friends repeatedly to interrupt her in a television interview or when she allows her assertive female friend Susan to speak for her at a business luncheon. Yet because this play was written by a woman and focuses on a woman's experiences, it has been hailed by the critical establishment as a feminist play; Robert Brustein, for example, claims that "Wasserstein's handling of female characters is as deft as her handling of feminist ideology" (34). Finally, Wasserstein's play has been heaped with awards, including the Drama Critics' Circle Award and a Pulitzer Prize, perhaps because its autonomous woman pattern gives it the surface patina of feminism while underneath that surface the play remains (as Moira Hodgson describes it) "harmless, . . . perfect for Broadway since there is nothing in it to offend deeply or shake up the house" (605).

The case of *The Heidi Chronicles* illustrates the dangers of an overly broad definition of feminist drama when appropriated by the patriarchal critical establishment. Yet the careful analysis of women's plays about autonomous women characters—what Elaine Showalter would call "gynocritics"—can, in fact, be an appropriate activity for feminist scholars, most particularly for those interested in reclaiming women's places in theatre history. In her work on Susanna Centlivre, for example, Joyce E. Henry demonstrates the value of the

"autonomous woman" approach. Focusing on Centlivre's *The Busie Body* (1709), the most-produced play in England from 1709-1750, Henry explores the actions of the play's heroine, Miranda, and the structure of the play.

On the surface, *The Busie Body* seems to be a traditional eighteenth-century comedy, complete with rake hero, miserly guardian, and witty and sentimental couples. Its enthusiastic critical reception, extensive production history, and popular success in its time also suggest the comfortable conventionality of the play. Yet Miranda, the witty heroine, breaks the mold. The rake hero (in typical fashion) tries to juggle two separate love affairs, one with a beautiful heiress and one with a witty *incognita*; only Miranda knows that she is both of them. The miserly guardian tries to cheat her out of her inheritance; Miranda outsmarts him while seeming to comply with his wishes. And when a typical eighteenth-century comedy would have the heroine hidden in a china closet to avoid disrupting the rake hero's plans, Miranda maneuvers her lover—the would-be rake—into a chimney where she passes him off as a monkey for whom she is designing a chain. In short, Miranda controls the plot, the actions of the male characters, and eventually her own destiny. Yet in the centuries since the play was first produced, critics and scholars have focused on the activities of Marplot, the busybody of the title, and overlooked Miranda's power in the play. It is only by examining the actions of this autonomous woman in comparison with female characters in other plays of the period, especially those written by men but using the same dramatic formulas, that Centlivre's subversive feminism can be fully understood.

The Search for a Female Form

Another approach to defining feminist drama focuses on an intersection of form and content perceived to be uniquely female. For scholars and theatre artists using this approach, a feminist play resists the oppressions of traditional dramatic practice in theme and form as well as in characterization; it may also resist the hierarchical power structures of traditional theatre practice, emerging as a collectively-scripted, avant-garde, alternatively produced ensemble piece.

An underlying premise of such an approach is that traditional dramatic form is by definition male; as Nancy S. Reinhardt has expressed it:

[T]he structure of traditional Western drama, an "imitation of an action," is linear, leading through conflict and tension to a major climax and resolution. . . . One could even say that this aggressive build-up, sudden big climax, and cathartic resolution suggests specifically the male *sexual* response. (36-7)

Beginning with this assumption, these definitions of feminist drama usually cite experiences central to women's collective history—childbirth, nurturing, mother-daughter bonds, sexual exploitation, etc.—and stress the alternative dramatic forms (usually cyclic) and the uniquely female language best suited to dramatizing them.

Linda Walsh Jenkins, for example, emphasizes the traditionally domestic and relationship-centered experiences of women; for her, a feminist play depicts those shared experiences in imagery and settings traditionally familiar to women (such as a kitchen) and in language that tends to be inclusive and circular (9-11). Helene Keyssar focuses on women's plays that replace traditional recognition scenes (which she defines as intrinsically male) with conventions of role transformation, arguing that such transformations "emphasize the commonality of the stories told and . . . refuse the old hierarchies of the theatre" (90). Rosemary Curb, too, has defined a "woman-conscious" theatre that unravels women's collective imagination in a multi-dimensional, psychic replay of myth and history (302-3).

This approach to defining or constructing feminist drama, while narrower and therefore less susceptible to cooptation than the autonomous woman model, is also controversial among feminists. As Jill Dolan has observed, such definitions universalize the experience of women (94), often excluding women who, for reasons of age, class, infertility, sexual orientation, etc., have not shared the intimate mother-daughter bonds or domestic experiences that such plays emphasize. Further, as Bassnett-McGuire has pointed out, experimental feminist theatre troupes sometimes find themselves unable to progress beyond their own "closed circle" (459), playing to like-minded audiences, "trapped by their own . . . outward-directed attacks on existing structures" (460).

In fact, this whole issue of a distinctly female form or language, a uniquely feminine aesthetic, remains a vexed one for me. It is in principle separatist, which may be counter-productive if the ideology of feminism demands social change and, therefore, should insist on attracting audiences for feminist playwrights. Moreover, the demand for a uniquely female form is based on a pair of premises I see as faulty: it not only assumes that there is a bipolar opposition between men and women, it also enshrines the idea of female superiority. As a result, the quest for a dramatic form based on female biology and history suffers from essentialism as well as from the actual replication of a hegemonic model within a female context. These views of linearity as uniquely "male" and circularity as "female," the belief that women are innately different from (if not better than) men, become especially problematic if one accepts the principle—as many feminists do—that the gender categories "male" and "female"

describe not a fundamental dichotomy, but social roles created by the interaction of biology, history, personal experience, and culture.

And yet, despite my own misgivings, I can see that such an approach to analyzing drama offers promising opportunities for de-trivializing women's biological and historical experiences—an activity that is certainly appropriate to feminist discourse. Like the autonomous woman model, when applied to a relevant play this strategy for analysis can offer important insights into feminist dramatic activity.

One play that illustrates the value of such an approach while avoiding some of its limitations is Susan Griffin's verse drama *Voices* (1979). Unlike the plays usually subject to this form of feminist inquiry (perhaps the most often cited being *The Daughters' Cycle* of Clare Coss, Sondra Segal, and Roberta Sklar), *Voices* particularizes the separate experiences of its five female characters. The women are from different age groups, different socioeconomic backgrounds, different family structures, different sexual orientations, and have different expectations from life. Yet as each character narrates the story of her life to the audience (the characters never interact, further emphasizing their uniqueness as well as their isolation), it becomes clear that they do have things in common. This is most apparent at the midpoint of the play, when each in turn describes a frightening turning point in her life, ending with the phrase "I had no place to go" (57). In quick succession each then laments "I was frightened" (57). Yet in overcoming such unique disasters as a bad marriage, a suicidal twin, a botched abortion, or being disinherited by her parents, each woman once again finds the inner resources and optimism to go on with her life.

Griffin here combines the notion of female autonomy and strength with that of collective experience. She makes this clearest near the end of the play, when the five actors briefly step out of their unique roles to speak chorally of historical female oppression. Yet the play does not end with—and so privilege—their chorus on female history. Rather, at the end of the play each actor steps back into her role, the communal experience apparently having helped each character to see possibilities for her future that had previously eluded her.

Griffin's play illustrates that the attempt to create a distinctly female form can provide important insights into women's experiences and that the study of women's history can empower women. Still, this emphasis on a uniquely female structure for feminist drama should not preclude the study of other models; *Voices* is noteworthy not only for the fluidity of its form and the poetry of its language, but also for the detailed individuality of its five characters. This particularity should not be overlooked. As playwright Michelene Wandor has noted:

[I]t should be obvious that there is not much to be gained from assuming that drama is per se some kind of "male form," and that when women write, they write in a totally different form which has never been invented before and which is common to women. Emotional, aesthetic, and structural styles are very varied among women writers. . . . It is the combination of the content and the writer's approach to it which produces the form which she thinks or feels is most appropriate. (184)

Materialist Feminist Studies

Until now, I have avoided using the labels that are often applied to different methods of feminist analysis—terms like "biological feminist," "cultural feminist," "radical feminist," "socialist feminist," etc.—because I have found these terms to be overlapping and reductive. In the case of the so-called "materialist feminists," however, I will risk using the convenient label. Although there are, of course, differences of emphasis in their works, these scholars share a common critical framework and, furthermore, identify themselves as materialist feminists. Their central critical premise—and the basis for their definition of feminist drama—is that gender is a cultural construct produced by material conditions.

A starting point for many of them has been Teresa de Lauretis' pioneering work in feminist film studies. Basing her arguments on current semiotic and psychoanalytic models, de Lauretis argues that identity, including one's identity as a woman, changes for each individual, every day, as she somehow maneuvers through her own life experiences, the ever-changing society in which she lives, and her own personal sense of self (*Alice* 14). As a result of the many roles she must play, the identity of a social subject is, according to de Lauretis, "multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory" (*FS/CS* 9); it is neither a generic, non-gendered being—a "universal"—nor an oppositional "feminine" subject defined by silence, negativity, nurturance, or any other allegedly "feminine" quality (*Alice* 161). Like Wandor (quoted above), de Lauretis thus emphasizes the differences not only between women but also within each individual woman.

The possibility of presenting this complex and mutable feminist subject in a theatrical context is the focal point of materialist feminist investigations of drama. The best and most convincing work of these scholars has come from their attention to the disruptions in a text—the structural changes, antimimetic devices, subversions of dramatic form, cross-gender casting, and redefinitions of theatrical performance—demanded by this newly recognized, chameleon-like feminist subject. Thus, we have learned about narrative disruptions from Elin Diamond; about foregrounding theatrical apparatus from Jill Dolan; and about a

lesbian aesthetic from Sue-Ellen Case and Jeanie Forte, to name just a prominent few.

These materialist feminist studies have been of inestimable value in creating a theoretical perspective from which to assess dramatic innovation and in analyzing the effect of such experiments. Partly as a result of their work, the feminist techniques of playwrights like Caryl Churchill and Simone Benmussa, as well as the innovations of feminist production companies like Split Britches, have been widely celebrated among feminist drama scholars. Moreover, the materialist feminist emphasis on woman as shifting subject-in-process has helped these theorists deconstruct the universal "woman," a concept which, as Sue-Ellen Case has noted, actually reifies women's oppression (55). Nonetheless, I see some problems in the works of these scholars as well, particularly in their somewhat inconsistent assumptions about inherited dramatic forms.

On the one hand, materialist feminists have appropriated certain pre-existing dramatic models which they see as empowering feminists to portray a female split subject. Of particular importance to their work is Bertolt Brecht, whose techniques of epic theatre can be transplanted into a feminist domain to "alienate" or foreground those moments in a playtext in which social attitudes about gender could be made visible" (Diamond "Brechtian Theory" 91). The recent work of Elin Diamond and Janelle Reinelt in particular has demonstrated that the study of Brechtian interventions in a text can offer theoretical insight into gender complexities.

On the other hand, this appropriation of Brechtian strategies for feminist drama also illustrates that techniques which can promote a feminist vision are not necessarily a product of a female psyche or a distinctly feminist aesthetic; in fact, many inherited techniques can be adapted and employed to dramatize feminist issues, no matter how unfeminist the original applications. This, however, is a ramification of materialist feminist theory that many overlook or reject outright. In particular, materialist feminists often denounce stage realism as a manifestation of patriarchal hegemony, a system to be overthrown or discarded. Sue-Ellen Case, for example, argues that because realism focuses on the domestic sphere and the family unit, it reifies the male as sexual subject and the female as the sexual "Other," making realism a "prisonhouse of art" for women (124). Many others concur that "Realism . . . is embedded in oppressive representational strategies . . ." (Dolan 84).

Yet if de Lauretis is correct that identity is fluid, a continuous interchange between the individual, the historical, and the cultural, it seems to me that we cannot simply dismiss realism or other traditional dramatic forms; like those forms, women's experiences, viewpoints, and senses of self are at least partly determined by the dominant culture. This is not to say, of course, that feminist

playwrights and theorists should not constantly seek to adapt, disrupt, and subvert traditional dramatic forms in order to say what they want to say; nor should they stop inventing new forms and new performance contexts in order to occupy and redefine the subject position in the theatre. But simply to discard traditional realism is also to overlook its power, its flexibility, and its possibilities for depicting feminist issues. Some materialist feminists grudgingly recognize this point. As Elin Diamond has said:

Why make this effort to recuperate mimesis? Because it tends, I think, to recuperate us. It is better perhaps to acknowledge certain mimetic desires, to militate for the complex, the different referents we want to see, even as we work to dismantle the mechanisms of patriarchal modeling. ("Mimesis" 62)

This point is especially important in discussing American drama, where formal realism has rarely relaxed its grip on the theatre; where rigidly Ibsenian forms of realism have always been adapted and adjusted, most obviously in American realistic drama's characteristic lack of closure (Murphy 182-94; Schroeder, *Presence* 26-28, 125-28); and where American women playwrights are stretching the boundaries of mimetic drama to embrace feminist concerns. As I have argued elsewhere, Marsha Norman's *Getting Out* and Wendy Kesselman's *My Sister in This House* both rely on the formal structures of realism to depict female characters' entrapment in material conditions, while disrupting that realism with antimimetic techniques that reveal a female character's shifting interiority as she responds to those conditions. The same could be said for some of the plays of Maria Irene Fornes, Beth Henley, Barbara Lebow, and others.

Realism, in fact, contains its own built-in subversive tendencies, as Catherine Belsey has argued. Even as it attempts to create closure and coherence, a realistic text is the product of diverse elements, "drawn from different discourses," and constructed by a shifting subject-in-process. As a result, and "in spite of itself, [the realist text] exposes incoherencies, omissions, absences and transgressions" (56) that provide opportunities for feminist playwrights and fruitful points of inquiry for feminist scholar-critics attuned to them. Furthermore, as Elinor Fuchs noted in response to an early version of this essay (presented at the 1989 ATHE convention), the materialist feminist demand to abandon realism is on a collision course with the interest in reviving women's populist literature, which also scrutinizes the material conditions that control identity. Seen from these perspectives, rejecting realism can be seen as both counterproductive and elitist.

The Dangers of Prescriptiveness

In spite of the evidence that realism is a flexible dramatic tool that can be used for a variety of purposes, many feminists still perceive it as dangerously hegemonic or exclusively male. For them, playwrights who use or adapt such traditional dramatic forms become politically incorrect—outcasts of the sisterhood. This, to me, has been the most unfortunate tendency of even the most astute feminist drama critics, no matter which model of feminist analysis they use. Too often a scholar will construct a definition of feminist drama and then assess plays written by women according to how well the playwrights have followed the critic's prescribed definition, offering the literary equivalent of "Good Housekeeping seals of approval or castigation" (Wandor 138). Using this formula, Helene Keyssar disparages Marsha Norman's *Getting Out* as not subversive enough in its dramaturgy (150); Jonnie Guerra complains that Beth Henley is not innovative enough to "render convincing portrayals of women as they awaken to the power within the self" (126); and even Jill Dolan, in her excellent study of the reception of Marsha Norman's 'night, *Mother*, asserts:

[the play's] focus on individual suffering and . . . unwillingness to discuss Jessie's dilemma in terms of a wider social context makes it weak as a political statement and inadequate from a materialist feminist perspective. (36)

These assessments from such diverse scholars, all of whom I greatly admire and from whom I have learned much, remind me uncomfortably of my American literature professor, whose definition of American drama in 1979 found everyone but Eugene O'Neill "inadequate" in terms of his own idiosyncratic definition. Given this critical climate, one sympathizes with playwright Maria Irene Fornes, who once lamented to an interviewer that "no one wants to see what's there" in her plays; "They all want to apply their own theories" (in Dolan 141).

It has been pointed out to me that there is a difference between patriarchal prescriptiveness, which assumes shared universal values, and the work of feminist critics (Jill Dolan, quoted above, would be a good example) who are careful to inscribe their analyses with their own subjectivity. This is an important distinction. Yet to dismiss the work of women playwrights because their ideology is faulty seems dangerous to me, no matter how subjectively the analysis is worded. The power of scholars and theorists to affect the careers of drama practitioners should not be underestimated. This point was underscored forcefully by playwright Joan Schenkar at the 1989 Women and Theatre Conference in New

York, when she stated that Vivian Patraka's critical study of her plays had strongly influenced her subsequent work. As feminist drama theorists struggle to locate and define those elements of drama that are capable of expressing feminist visions, we should remember that our ultimate goal is to define feminist dramatic strategies and assess their capabilities, not to reject the work of women who fail to conform.

In Defense of Critical Pluralism

The solution to this critical overemphasis on politically correct playwriting, it seems to me, is to promote a healthy pluralism in defining feminist drama—to bridge the gaps between form and content, tradition and innovation, culture and individual, rebellion and accommodation. As we read and experience women's plays, analyze their content from a feminist viewpoint, assess the dramatic structures that enable them to express feminist concerns, and draw up a descriptive rather than a prescriptive list of successful techniques, we need to keep de Lauretis' definitions of the individual subject in mind. If the concept "woman" is shifting, multiple, and self-contradictory, feminist plays will necessarily take shifting, multiple forms. And if this shifting woman-as-subject is a product of her social conditioning as well as her own desires, it is reasonable to assume that a feminist play might include traditional qualities as well as innovative ones, and may even employ elements of realism. Any attempt to militate for a coherent ideology or to prescribe a single form is to overlook the possibilities of the rich and varied feminist theatrical activity around us, to put on the same sort of critical blinders worn by my professor in 1979.

Not all Americanists were so myopic in 1979, however. Writing in that same year, Annette Kolodny, a feminist scholar of American literature, argued (in a now-infamous essay) that:

our task [as feminists] is to initiate nothing less than a playful pluralism, responsive to the possibilities of multiple critical schools and methods, but captive of none, recognizing that the many tools needed for our analysis will necessarily be largely inherited and only partly of our own making. ("Dancing" 161)

Kolodny's position has become somewhat unfashionable in the years since 1979. Because she offers no specific political agenda, Kolodny has been criticized for claiming too little for feminism (Modleski 125); as Jill Dolan has commented (although not in direct reply to Kolodny), "Feminism loses some of its polemical force if it is not linked to a coherent ideological structure" (3). Others contend

that, because she does not insist on the universal truth of her own paradigms, Kolodny offers feminism not as a life strategy but as nothing more than one of many possible critical methodologies (Newton xxix). But in her unwavering attention to the pluralities of women's experiences and creations, both in 1979 and in her work of the past decade, Kolodny *is* espousing an ideology: she shares the materialist feminist belief that the female subject is multiple and fragmented, so feminist discourse cannot and should not valorize coherence. To do so would be to suppress differences and dissent rather than to encourage a dialogue between competing possibilities.

In her more recent work, Kolodny has clarified this position. In a 1982 response to several detractors, she defined her notion of a feminist pluralism in more detail:

By "pluralism" I meant recognizing and respecting the legitimacy of differentness—with a consequent denial of the straitjacket of dogma. The pluralism I was seeking to describe means a dialogue that keeps the questions open; as it also implies a deep skepticism toward absolutist doctrine . . . (Gardiner, "An Interchange" 667)

Kolodny's redefined position on pluralism has much to offer feminist scholars as we struggle to define feminist dramatic praxis without disparaging each other's work, condemning politically incorrect playwrights, or renouncing certain kinds of dramatic forms.

In fact, the variety of available theatrical forms is one of the strengths of the contemporary theatre, and feminists can take advantage of this variety. To deny women playwrights this freedom, to insist that their plays cannot be considered feminist unless they adhere to a particular ideological stance within feminism or that they take shape in a certain prescribed dramatic form, is to create a feminist literary canon which, like more traditional canons, would become "self-referential and self-reinforcing, a touchstone system" (Gardiner, "Gender" 114). Such criticism restricts rather than empowers playwrights, and seems to me much more dangerous than the prospect of ideological incompleteness. Feminist writers and scholars must, of course, continue to study, develop, analyze, and define their own tradition, in theatre as in all else. But to insist that plays conform to any rigidly defined feminist aesthetic will only mean that feminism is, indeed, just another hegemonic system.

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