

"radicalized modernity" (236). The crisis of representation, argues Bertens, is really a crisis only, or mainly, for those in the university humanities disciplines. Though "rationality cannot found itself" there are still examples of grounds and universals, if only in the natural sciences. Bertens could clarify and update this part of his argument by looking at writing on science since Thomas Kuhn. There is by now a broader (and for humanists, exciting) recognition that an understanding of representation is crucial for the natural sciences, because of the heuristic but also limiting role of representation in the discovery stages of scientific work. Scientists such as Stephen Jay Gould assent in part to a social-constructionist view of science. Evolutionist Richard Dawkins's work on memes begins to bring together genetics and the study of what we might choose to call "representations," seen by him as effective "life forms." In the face of such developments, Bertens's conclusion seems too cautious. Clearly postmodernism (whatever you think it is) is not yet played out, and is only beginning to extend its habits of thought to the most prestigious areas of our culture.

HARRY VANDERVLIST



Margaret R. Higonnet, ed. *Borderwork: Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994. Pp. x, 335. \$44.95, \$16.95 pb.

In *A Room of One's Own* (1928), Virginia Woolf identifies an absence in British literary history—the absence of women's writings from the archive—and points to ways rectifying it. She reinterprets a historical record deformed by patriarchal ideological hegemony, revalues works once deemed subliterate or otherwise unworthy of attention, and argues that the future of women's creativity depends on the collective efforts of women: that is, on feminist politics. *Borderwork: Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature*, a collection of essays edited by Margaret R. Higonnet, takes up the project set out in *A Room of One's Own* and elaborated in the work of Woolf's successors, critics of British (women's) writing nurtured by second-wave feminism. But the contributors to this volume extend feminist criticism and theory beyond the confines of the British (and European) national languages and literary formations that constitute Woolf's frame of reference. In preparation at the same time as the 1993 Bernheimer Report to the American Comparative Literature Association on the state of the discipline of comparative literature, *Borderwork* anticipates many of Bernheimer's concerns.<sup>1</sup> The essays in *Borderwork* implicate gender, along with other determinants of positionality (identity) and cultural production, in a transnational or global political order. In interrogating the key terms of the subtitle, "feminist" and "comparative," moreover, *Borderwork* works to remap the terrains of comparative literature and feminist studies alike.

The book is divided into four sections, each of which addresses a category that organizes feminist and/or comparatist theory and practice. The first section, "Cross-cultural Constructions of Female Subjects," addresses the "subject" of feminist criticism and comparative literature through consideration of excision, slavery, and rape. In all three essays, cross-cultural comparison underwrites discussion of subjectivity and expands the canon—the subject-matter—of comparative literature. The second section, "Genre Theory," explores the ways that gender—or a gender-inflected critique—and a comparative, transnational perspective revise traditional genres, produce new ones, or disrupt generic categories altogether. The third section, "Sites of Critical Practice," addresses issues such as critical standpoint and examines the disciplines and institutions in and against which feminist criticism and comparative literature have been and continue to be shaped. The fourth section, "Future Engagements," outlines agendas for feminist comparatist theory, practice, and pedagogy.

Several of the essays point to the underdevelopment of comparative literature and feminist criticism alike. Taken together, these essays suggest that this underdevelopment is reciprocal: they argue that feminist criticism has been skewed by the absence of a coherent comparatist perspective and, conversely, that resistance to feminist modes of analysis has stunted the field of comparative literature. In foregrounding the working of gender, *Borderwork* sharpens the discussion of comparative literature in the Bernheimer volume. Both Higonnet's introduction and Susan Sniader Lanser's "Compared to What? Global Feminism, Comparatism, and the Master's Tools" argue that the discipline of comparative literature, as it has evolved in the US, has been impoverished by its focus on a Eurocentric, male canon and its "intersecting commitments to aestheticism and canonicity, tradition as longevity, theory as Continental philosophy, literature as intertext, and language as the Ur-ground of comparison" (Higonnet 5; Lanser 284). Sarah Webster Goodwin's "Cross Fire and Collaboration among Comparative Literature, Feminism, and the New Historicism," echoing and broadening Woolf's discussion of British literature, suggests that comparative literature needs feminism to limn the contours of "feminine international literary cultures" and not just the masculine ones already studied by comparatists (265-56), while Lanser urges us to expand the horizons of feminism and comparative literature alike.

One mode of expansion is the rethinking of literary genres and traditions performed in *Borderwork* by Lore Metzger's "Modifications of Genre: A Feminist Critique of 'Christabel' and 'Die Braut von Korinth'" and Chris Cullens's "Female Difficulties, Comparatist Challenge: Novels by English and German Women, 1752-1814." Metzger shows how the figure of the "undead" woman in Goethe and Coleridge destabilizes the ballad genre and marks a moment of cultural change in England and Germany alike. Cullens similarly finds in

the material situation of middle-class women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the limitations that shaped—formed and deformed—writings either invisible to or devalued in traditional hierarchies of judgment. These essays might have been enriched by comparison between the male poets that Metzger discusses and their contemporaries, the women novelists that Cullens writes about. I was also puzzled by Cullens's unexplained omission of Jane Austen, surely the best-known woman novelist of the period. Here, ironically, a comparative approach obscures features of British/women's literary history that more traditional accounts might illuminate.

If comparative literature has not taken gender into account, *Borderwork* suggests, feminist criticism has not developed an international or global perspective capable of fostering adequately comparative work. Consequently, feminism has been stymied by the impasses of identity politics, impasses that inhibit or foreclose the possibility of writing across, beyond, or at the borders of differences of class, race, ethnicity, nationality. The remedy, as several contributors point out, is a feminist comparatist approach—Lanser calls it “comparative specificity” (297)—that accommodates, even embraces difference. Different versions of this approach are outlined in Lanser's essay as well as in Bella Brodzki's “Changing Masters: Gender, Genre, and the Discourses of Slavery,” Françoise Lionnet's “Dissymmetry Embodied: Feminism, Universalism, and the Practice of Excision,” Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's “Life after Rape: Narrative, Theory, and Feminism,” and Higonnet's “Cassandra's Question: Do Women Write War Novels?”

Lionnet argues that female excision has too often been treated in the west in “reductionist and/or ethnocentric modes which represent the people who practice it as backward, misogynistic, and generally lacking in humane and compassionate inclinations” (21). She proposes instead an analytical strategy like the one deployed in Egyptian feminist Nawal El Saadawi's treatment of excision in *Woman at Point Zero*. El Saadawi's “strategy of displacement and identification” seeks the universal through the particular or the personal (32-33). Lionnet's own version of this strategy is *métissage*, a mixing or braiding of heterogeneous elements that produces “dialogical hybrids” (41) such as cross-cultural reading and writing.<sup>2</sup> Higonnet shows how women's writing is excluded from conventional notions of war literature that regard representations of (men's) experience at the front as definitive of the genre. In contrast, she describes a heteroglot group of women's texts that cross national and destabilize generic boundaries. To designate canonical works such as *To the Lighthouse* and little-known examples of the semi-fictional sketch and testimonial as war literature—to assign them to the same genre—brings into focus similarities without reducing cultural difference or historical and geographical distance. Rajan inserts the figure of the raped woman into narratives of nationality, class, and caste. In setting British, male-authored texts such as *A*

*Passage to India* next to "Sirai" (Prison), a short story written in Tamil by Anuradha Ramanan, Rajan outlines a transnational feminist narratology in which rape is neither the climax nor the end of the story and which finds "inscriptions of desire and guilt in narrativity itself" (77). Brodzki exposes the theoretical weaknesses of discourses of slavery that assume a masculine vantage-point or the centrality of the African-American experience. In her discussion of Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*, a novel about slavery in early 20th-century Nigeria, Brodzki argues persuasively that "slavery" and "gender" alike are historically and geographically—that is, nationally—specific. She urges us to address historical and cultural differences through a "diasporic criticism" that takes into account both the local and the global, while not reducing either to the other.

Feminist comparative engagement, as described in *Borderwork*, has political as well as literary implications, both inside and outside the academy. Fedwa Malti-Douglas, in "Dangerous Crossings: Gender and Criticism in Arabic Literary Studies," suggests that "Arab literature" and/or "Arab feminism" have been either distorted, misconstrued, or rendered invisible by the institutional settings in which they have been scrutinized, the disciplinary and interdisciplinary configurations of "Middle East studies" and "postcolonial theory." As a corrective, Malti-Douglas insists that we examine Arabo-Islamic writings as part of a historical ensemble in which the cultural work of gender is a crucial element. Nancy K. Miller, in "Philoctetes' Sister: Feminist Literary Criticism and the New Misogyny," originally written in 1989, shows how misogynist attacks on feminist criticism couched in a rhetoric of universal humanist values prefigure the current attacks on affirmative action ostensibly being waged on behalf of abstract conceptions of racial equality unrealized in the actual world we inhabit.

One strategy for combatting these attacks is outlined in the discussions of feminist comparatist pedagogy in Vève Clark's "Talking Shop: A Comparative Feminist Approach to Caribbean Literature by Women" and Obioma Nnaemeka's "Bringing African Women into the Classroom: Rethinking Pedagogy." These essays propose a teaching practice that, like Lanser's "comparative specificity," crosses departmental as well as disciplinary borders and continental and hemispheric as well as national boundaries. Clark, for example, notes that leaving a French department for a department of African-American studies made it easier to teach Caribbean writers whose work demands comparison of the Americas and Africa to Europe and the French, Spanish, English, and creole languages. Another strategy for struggling against misogyny and racism, and one implicit in Miller's essay along with several others, is that of a coalition politics that seeks possible commonalities—Nnaemeka's word is "contiguities"—of interest while it acknowledges points of conflict and contention. Coalition politics might even be seen as a practical version of theoretical perspectives such as Lionnet's *métissage* and Brodzki's diasporic criticism.

Although comparative literature has traditionally required of its practitioners knowledge of several languages and literary traditions, it also asks us to translate from one language to another or, as in the case of the "international English" that comprises the topic of *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, from one culture to another within the same global language area. Indeed, according to Bernheimer, one of the most important ways that the discipline of comparative literature has changed is the acceptance of translation as a significant mode of comparative critical and pedagogical practice. *Borderwork* shows us how to negotiate egalitarian and reciprocal protocols of political and cultural translation and, thus, how to do the work of feminist comparison that it insists is necessary in the current and future global order.

LOUISE YELIN

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Bernheimer's report, along with earlier reports by Harry Levin (1965) and Thomas Greene (1975) and responses to the report, are collected in Charles Bernheimer, ed., *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995). The impetus for the Bernheimer report was a perception that the field of comparative literature was in crisis, in part because the kinds of work that comparatists were actually doing did not conform to disciplinary paradigms that authorized studies of European, mainly male, authors across national and linguistic boundaries. The contributors to the Bernheimer volume redefine the comparative enterprise, relocate it in a global political and cultural order, and rearrange the map of comparative literature. They point to new modes of comparison (within the same language area, between the works of women and men) and new areas of interest such as emergent literatures in post-colonial nations and minority literatures within dominant literary and political cultures.
- <sup>2</sup> Lionnet's notion of *métissage* is elaborated in *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995).