*A Literature of Their Own Revisited*( Background).

Showalter devotes most of her revised *Literature of their Own* to arguments that respond to the questions/criticism posed by Toril Moi in *Sexual*/*Textual Politics*( first published in 1985). Moi’s criticism( which has been discussed in class) places an emphasis on the theoretical implications vis-à-vis Women’s writing of Showalter’s two forms of feminist criticism—‘gynocritics’ alongside ‘feminist critique’ that according to Moi offer “ unstated theoretical assumptions about the relationship between literature and reality and between feminist politics and literary evaluation”(*Sexual*/*Textual Politics* 55). This statement( as discussed in class) Moi elucidates by a critical evaluation of Showalter’s gynocriticism and by Showalter’s “ rejection”( *Sexual*/*Textual Politics* 2) of Woolf as a failed feminist. A core source of Moi’s criticism is Showalter’s exemplification of women’s experience( a concern of gynocritics) as made available in literature written by women and further more problematically Woolf’s exclusion from such a tradition or articulation of women’s experience by her engagement with androgyny and her stylistic immersion in literary modernism. In both cases such a fetishizing of women’s authentic experience is according to Moi aligned with Western humanism( patriarchal humanism), its proclivity to determine White male experience as universal or representative of authentic human experience. While Showalter’s assertion of a female tradition is intended to undermine the male canon as a repository of male( western) values, the construct of women’s authentic experience as directly available in a particular tradition of women’s writing that Showalter sets up is not different from the universalizing perspective of western male humanism as representative of authentic human experience. The text appears to be a medium, a transparent media through which this experience is conveyed. This involves a disengagement with textual process or procedures of meaning-making that suggests a direct correspondence or “relationship between literature and reality”( see quote above of Moi): the working of the text or the operations of the text as it exists to construct a reality-effect is effaced. In relation to Woolf, according to Showalter Woolf’s concept of androgyny enabled her to avoid an engagement with “painful femaleness”( *Literature of their Own* 264) that succeeded in repressing Woolf’s rage or ambition. The androgynous turn is seen by Showalter as an escape from a “troubled feminism” ( *Literature of their Own* 282). Showalter’s trouble with Woolf’s androgyny is also located in Woolf’s aesthetics that do not present a single voice or subjective position. The techniques that Woolf uses in her fiction( as well as in texts such as *The Room*) shape an aesthetic that relies on repetition, shifting perspectives, parody etc. producing an elusiveness, chiefly the absence of a single unifying voice that then according to Showalter impedes the communication of an authentic experience, or the authentic feminist state of mind as indicated by “ angry and alienated ones” ( *Literature of their Own* 287). Showalter’s position on Woolf is therefore as Moi elucidates impelled by Woolf’s aesthetics presenting a conflation between “feminist politics and literary evaluation”(55). Woolf’s aesthetics and her contestation of the “unitary self” imply that the text does not transmit direct experience of the author: the text should reproduce the experience of the author and perhaps the more unguardedly or unreservedly and what she sees as authentic fashion( this is Showalter’s view of aesthetics in relation to feminist politics) the experience is transmitted, the more worthwhile it is for the reader. Woolf’s essay do not convey the experience in such a direct manner( on account of its modernist aesthetics). These elements then do now allow Woolf to talk about her own personal experience and also she remains according to Showalter alienated from the commonplace worlds of women on account of her upper class position. What Showalter endorses is the expression of the experience of the author in a social framework: an expression of a belief in realist aesthetics. A central concern or criticism of Showalter as outlined by Moi is the lack of a theoretical framework that informs knowledge of the feminist archive that Showalter seeks to build. There is in this context as Moi points out Showalter’s dismissal of what she considers male theory as represented by Freud, Lacan etc.( we have discussed this in detail in class). However Showalter uses Lukacs to advocate her insistence on a single unitary self that is produced through a realist aesthetic. Yet Lukacs’s proletarian humanism, the belief in a whole human subject that is being undermined by capitalist forces is different therefore from Showalter because of Lukacs’s engagement with capitalism( Lukacs has also been discussed in class).1 Showalter’s problems with Woolf stem from a belief in the unified self that is consistent with the concept of self as outlined by Western male humanism. What, according to Moi, Showalter does not consider is that this unified self ( as opposed to the multiple and divided selves in Woolf) that she speaks for as a source or condition to narrativize authentic experience of women is “in effect part of patriarchal ideology”(*Sexual*/*Textual Politics* 8). To quote from Moi: “At its centre is the seamlessly unified self—either individual or collective—which is called ‘Man’. As Luce Irigaray or Helene Cixous would argue, this integrated self is in fact a phallic self, constructed on the model of the self-contained, powerful phallus. Gloriously autonomous, it banishes from itself all conflict, contradiction and ambiguity”. This unitary self becomes the basis of all “history and of the literary text”(8). So the deployment of a single I implies the replication of a reality that is already given by a “masculine world or self”(8).

The above notes sum up Moi’s criticism of Showalter’s evaluation of feminist literary archive. We have discussed it in class as well. In the following notes there will be a discussion of Showalter’s rebuttal of Moi which is in *Literature of their Own Revisited*.

Essay: *Literature of their Own Revisited*(96-100).

Before her defence vis-à-vis Moi’s observations which begins in page 100, there are several statements about her work and theoretical intentions that Showalter makes regarding the question of ‘feminist literary history’ and in relation to it gynocriticism and the features and possible “autonomy of a women’s literary tradition”(97) as subculture and eventually as part of “literary mainstream”(96). The first significant statement regarding “female literary tradition” is on page 96( starting para in your text)—“If there was…psychology”…Showalter conceptualises this female tradition as one based on “imitation” or “literary convention”---this connects to the classification Showalter has made regarding female literary tradition as feminine/feminist/female which we have discussed in class. The question of “marketplace” or “critical reception” relates to obvious questions of recognition, assignation of value and codification: habits or systems of codification instituted in the market that determine how a text or author is received or gets produced( published or circulated) as well as what is deemed of value impact upon the production or construction of narrative and literary tradition. The larger question posed here is regarding the temporary nature of female literary fame that has meant that women writers are constantly compelled to reclaim or restore in history writers who came before them: a pattern of continuous interruptions that has prevented the development of a collective sense of identity or programme . Showalter’s theoretical assumptions as she points out come from sociology and ethnography that define women’s writing as evolving in relation to the dominant mainstream. Her attempt to find continuities between women writers( as well as critics) Showalter clarifies is a “ historically specific strategy”(page 100 in your text) and therefore not something that is to be perceived as independent of things or to be seen as “dogmatic absolute”( 100).

Response to Moi( section heading Theories)

Moi’s criticism as also outlined by Showalter for her defence( page 101) point to Showalter’s over reliance on the communication of an authentic experience as enabled by the text’s direct reflection of the author’s experience. Such a position signals a bias toward bourgeoise humanism( realist aesthetic/crypto-Lukacsian) as reflected through a single unifying vision and a corresponding antipathy toward the methods of modernism and its “feminist uses”(101). The theoretical failure then is as Moi points out: “ its unstated assumptions…evaluation”( discussed earlier). Showalter defends her position by claiming that her approach was different and the theoretical underpinning of her positions came from social history and cultural anthropology. Her questions are about literature, canon formation and gender as it manifests a relation between dominant culture and a subordinate(“muted”) one. Is it possible for “ muted” culture to have an autonomous literature that can be assessed in a way independent of the dominant culture’s standards or chronology? If there are alternate literary subcultures what might be their trajectory of growth or evolution process etc. Questions of text or reading practice is not her focus of interest( 102). Realism too according to Showalter involves techniques that go beyond a simple mimesis and the approach of gynocriticism provides a trajectory for women’s writing as it develops through “subordination and protest and autonomy”(102).

To analyse Showalter’s defence, while Showalter is correct to state that her project to set up an archive( canon) of women’s literary voices or a chronology for women’s writing is a historical project as well as the fact that realist aesthetic is not merely based on a reflectionist model. But the question of authenticity or what is defined as authentic female experience remains unproblematised(translating into the similar assumptions of authenticity as represented by bourgeois humanism). Such a question as well as the meaning of autonomy or the assessment of autonomy( in relation to dominant voices) requires a questioning of the female voice and to view the act of writing as well as reading practice as “textual production”( as Moi puts it).

Section: Literary History and the Canon

The important point of discussion in this section concerns the project of canon-making that Showalter is accused of undertaking alongside the persistence of value and hierarchy that Showalter adheres to in relation to any map of literary history.The accusation against Showalter is that in her work ‘literary’ as a category is uncritically deployed. The notion of literary as a special language or a somewhat exemplary category separate from other cultural phenomena/texts has been challenged with the emergence of structuralist theory and the phenomena of literary theory/culture studies.2 The uncritical use of such a category then shapes a specific chronology of the development of women’s literary tradition. Showalter’s response is a defence of canon formation, an exercise she thinks is necessary to reinstate devalued authors as well as to “evaluate the relative success and failure of women’s writing”(107). The canon has the attribute of always been exclusive but Showalter argues that interests or any group’s interests that a canon represents can be historicized. Using Brodhead(page 106) she suggests that whether those interests can consolidate or a particular canon survive is not on account of “innate value”(107) but whether such interests can “institutionalize themselves” or remake as “new institutions” by drawing upon the old(institutions) to perpetuate its value. Showalter points to Ann Ardis’s observation( and demand that all literary hierarchies should be abolished) that often a defence of aesthetics( a focus on formal features in literary works) in literary works conceal an anxiety about the feminist credentials of these works. The focus on aesthetics or on the formal signal a defence of cultural values ( according to Ardis) rather than an attention to the ideological predilections of these texts. While Ardis’s point is that a consideration of aesthetics( for literary value) on the part of a feminist critic is implicated in the defence of cultural values (and therefore a corresponding inattention to ideological interests) as well as a way to obviate the question of problematic feminist politics, it is useful to go back here to Moi’s criticism of Showalter’s position on Woolf . Showalter’s position is largely determined by her hostility to Woolf’s modernist aesthetics which she argues as implicated in her failure to convey an authentic feminist vision. The effect as Moi points out is the defence of bourgeoise humanist values as connotated by Showalter’s problem with Woolf’s undermining of the unitary self and what she thinks therefore as Woolf’s failure to create a feminist voice. Showalter’s response to Ardis’s comments( page 107/last paragraph in the section) is that her questions( Ardis’s) fail to address the question of value. However the starting point of Ardis’s thesis is a denunciation of literary value and as it tends to be constructed on a premise of an overvaluation of aesthetics as a way to defend certain values( in a disguised fashion) and therefore conceal the critic’s anxiety about ideological perspectives in those texts or ignore such pressures altogether. Showalter however insists that literary hierarchies are important and women’s writing can stand the test of any evaluation or judgement.

Section: New Women and their Fiction

In this section, Showalter responds to charges that she had excluded women’s suffrage novel from her archive. Admitting that there was a lack of research available on the suffrage novel which contributed to its absence from her work, Showalter suggests that she would now be able to give more importance and scope to the 1890s(the New Woman writer) as “a transitional period for women’s writing”(108). In her discussions on the novel in the 1890s, Showalter suggests(borrowing from John Kucich) that the fin-de-siècle group of writers(page 110) found it difficult to align the struggle of addressing the complexity of truth within fiction with the agenda of feminist politics. The failure to do so meant that they had to move away from what is presented by Kucich( to which Showalter agrees) as the special provenance of truth telling established by the more canonical tradition of Victorian realism.3 Consequently they( fin-de-siècle) began to view their struggle as a matter they could overcome or find a solution for by resorting to over refinement/aestheticism(page 111).

Section: The 21st Century

The last section clearly indicates Showalter’s adherence to traditional aesthetic categories upheld by Anglo-American feminist tradition. Rather than seeing Woolf’s feminist politics as situated in the textual methods of her writing for example in *The Room*, Showalter has a problem with Woolf’s narrative strategies and characterises Woolf’s room(*The Room*) as an “isolated space in women’s fiction”( 112). Showalter( as a contrast to Moi) posits traditional aesthetic categories to establish continuities in a female literary tradition and Woolf’s own investments in anxiety or paralysis and even illness and death is viewed as outside of the “contact with female tradition and a female culture”(112).

What is important for everyone to note here is the divide between Moi and Showalter’s positions that is not in any case lessened by Showalter’s revision of *Literature of their Own*. While Moi extols Woolf’s deconstructive practice( in relation to language/gender identity) as a vital challenge to Western male humanism, Showalter sees Woolf’s textual practices as a failure or a reluctance to directly speak in her own voice and even though expressly she wishes to contest the western canon her trouble with the profusion of voices/I’s present in Woolf align her with the western male humanism’s(bourgeoise humanism’s) understanding of human identity.4

Toward the end of the essay Showalter mentions “distinctions of gender”(112) which may soon become irrelevant to literary history but there is no elaboration on( even though her revised essay was written in 1998) any of these changes whether this may be the question of non-binary identity or transgender identity and how it may inform—or as we know generate tensions within—feminist politics and history.

End Notes

1. Lukacs was critical of the modernist novel because he believed that modernist aesthetics did not adequately offer a critique of fascism and in fact he argued that modernism’s aesthetic practices actually made available or enabled the consolidation of fascism. Moi points out there is a difference between Lukacs’s proletarian humanism and the bourgeoise humanism of Showalter. It is also important to note here that Woolf was however engaged with the question of fascism( *Three Guineas*).
2. Stating the obvious as I am sure everyone is aware that the beginning of literary theory can be located in the challenge to the meaning or conceptualisation of the ‘literary’. It also accounts for the dominance of cultural studies as a field within literature departments.
3. As should be evident Showalter’s aesthetic/political criteria is clearly based on her preference for realist aesthetics/fiction.
4. The essay“ Woolf’s feminism and feminism’s Woolf”( from the Cambridge Companion to Woolf ) which some of you may have read earlier is useful on debates on feminism around Woolf and includes a discussion on Showalter.