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Writing About a Woman Writer's Writing: On Gender Identification(s) and Being a Male Critic of Carol Shields's Work

ABSTRACT

This essay takes as its starting point my experience as a male critic of Carol Shields's work. Throughout the researching and writing of my PhD on Shields, I have noted with curiosity the surprise registered by many people upon discovering that a male critic would choose to write about the work of a female author. This reaction, confirmed by other male academics working on female authors, raises a number of interesting questions. What does it mean for a male critic to write about the work of a female author? Why is this still considered surprising, unusual, even strange? Is this view symptomatic of the kind of disturbing devaluation of women's fiction (and of women's experience generally) that Shields herself explores so candidly in her final novel *Unless* (2002)? I suggest that the anti-feminist backlash (outlined by Faludi [1991]), and the profitable establishment of popular literary genres such as "Chick Lit" and "Lad Lit," have led to a retrogressive "hardening" of gender roles within popular culture, one which endorses a simplistic relationship between author and audience, presuming that texts "by" women must necessarily be "for" women only. Situated within the context of Shields's own professed ambivalence about her status as a "women's writer," and drawing on the theories of Emma Wilson, the essay attempts to broaden out into a wider reflection upon issues of gender and identification within contemporary literary culture. Shields's work, I argue, subverts assumptions about gendered reading patterns, encouraging through its polyphony and its use of dual narrators a mobile and flexible reading experience which allows the reader to inhabit a range of perspectives and to read productively across gender binaries.

ABSTRACT

The act of reading may constitute a performance [or series of performances] where the reader assumes the position with which she [*sic*] chooses to identify. . . . If we read from multiple subject-positions the very act of reading becomes a force for dislocating our belief in stable subjects and essential meanings. (Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* 35)

Readers do not only work on texts, but texts work on readers, and this involves a complex double dialectic of two bodies inscribed in language. (Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice* 18)

In September 2008 I attended the biannual conference on Iris Murdoch's work which was held at Kingston University in London. On the final day of the conference, during one of the coffee breaks, I was talking to a male colleague who had recently completed a PhD on Murdoch's fiction and philosophy. We were approached by one of the other conference delegates, who introduced us to her sister, a Murdoch admirer who was attending the final day of the conference. Before being introduced, however, our colleague's sister greeted us with the following remark: "I didn't expect that there would be any men at this conference!" When we asked why, she pointed out that Murdoch was of course a female writer whose work, for that reason, must surely be of limited interest or appeal to men.

The suggestion that the work of a world-renowned female novelist and philosopher would hold little interest for male critics may seem a particularly extreme example of gender biases within the sphere of literary culture. But it is not, I would argue, an entirely unrepresentative view. Indeed, ruminating on this incident afterwards, I became aware of the ways in which it resonated with various other comments made to me during my own PhD work on Carol Shields, and the surprise registered by some people that a male researcher would choose to study the work of a female author.

"How unusual for a man to write about Carol Shields!" "Why would you choose Shields?" Variations on these kinds of statements formed a refrain throughout my years of PhD study. My initial response to such comments tended to be a rather defensive one: I would refer to Shields's use of male protagonists and narrators, her avowed frustration with her categorization as a "women's writer," and the insights that I felt her work offered into human experience, beyond gender. Nonetheless, it did sometimes appear that I was being put into the position of having to defend or justify my choice of Shields as a subject for PhD study, and that this related specifically to the issue of gender difference. The idea of a male researcher writing about the work of a female author clearly appeared to some people to be unusual, note-worthy, even strange. This essay, then, attempts to place my experience as a male critic of Shields within the context of a wider

reflection upon issues of gender and identification in contemporary literary culture, and a discussion of gendered reading patterns as they are (de-) constructed within Shields's work itself.

Essentialist definitions of masculinity and femininity, definitions regarding male and female "subject-matter" and the kind of work that men and women "naturally" respond to, have begun to reassert themselves strongly in contemporary discourse. Limited perceptions of how and what men and women read seem symptomatic of a wider cultural turn in which, for example, texts by female authors have been increasingly categorized as texts for female readers only.

A number of reasons might be identified for these trends. In particular, I would argue that the rise of profitable popular literary genres such as "Lad Lit" and "Chick Lit" has contributed to creating a gender segregation within literary culture, dividing men and women into two distinct consumer groups and reviving mainstream media debates about issues such as the inability of female authors to construct convincing male characters, and male authors' alleged incapacity to write (and lack of desire to read) romantic fiction.¹

Further, the perceived schism between male and female readers and writers can also be viewed as a manifestation of the anti-feminist backlash, the implications of which were outlined so perceptively by Susan Faludi in the early 1990s. As Faludi explains, one of the characteristics of the backlash has been its denigration and patronization of "feminized" men (58–60); the male reader of female-authored texts might easily find himself placed within this category. The disavowal of texts that might be classified, in colloquial British parlance, as "girly" may help to explain the continued tendency of male students to avoid Women's Writing courses, while male scepticism about women's cultural production has also been documented in other arenas. A survey of music consumption undertaken by Women's Studies researcher Victoria Rutherford, for example, discovered that only one male out of twenty-three named any women artists among his top-ten favourite musicians (O'Brien 454).²

It is my contention, then, that a confluence of factors has worked to discourage male readers from responding to female-authored or female-focused texts and that this is part of a retrogressive hardening of gender

¹ The contemporary re-classification of 19th century novels by Austen and the Brontës as "Chick Lit" is explored in Ferris and Young 47–70. Ray Connolly and Liz Hunt debate the (in)ability of men to write romantic fiction in "Can Men Write Romance?" *The Telegraph* (14 September 2006) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3655276/Can-men-write-romantic-novels.html>

² A complimentary study of the amount of male critics writing on female authors would be valuable, but is unfortunately beyond the scope of the present analysis.

roles in popular culture. For the male reader or consumer, to confess to appreciating work by or “targeted at” women is to risk to be seen to be “doing your gender wrong,” in Judith Butler’s excellent phrase (255). In Butler’s terms, the successful performance of masculinity within contemporary culture would seem to involve the rejection or denigration of women’s cultural production, precisely the kind of devaluation of women’s work that Shields herself explores in her final novel *Unless* (2002) with its indictment of female exclusion from the cultural sphere and its critique of abiding masculinist biases in canons of significant writers and thinkers.³ The implications of this are disturbing, for, as Gloria Steinem reminds us, “the false division of human nature into ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ is the root of all other divisions into subject and object, active and passive—the beginning of hierarchy” (270).

In her essay “The Worth of Women’s Work,” featured in the first *Dropped Threads* volume (2001), Nina Lee Colwill offers a complimentary perspective on these issues. “To study women and work,” Colwill argues, “is to confront a belief shared by every culture in every country on the planet: the assumption that men, the things men do, and all things masculine are more valuable than women, the things women do and all things feminine” (340). Colwill’s comments arguably veer into essentialism here, and, following Steinem, we may find her categories of masculinity and femininity somewhat strict. But her essay is particularly insightful in its analysis of how these cultural biases continue to manifest themselves:

For women to do . . . men’s work is for women to better themselves—a fine accomplishment in an achieving society. But praise is not as loud for the men who become nurses or take on the family’s housework and childcare. To emulate one’s superiors . . . is to increase one’s status. To emulate one’s inferiors smacks of perversion. (341)

Colwill’s argument may be applied to the sphere of literary criticism. Writing about women’s writing seems to require justification for the male critic, but for the female critic writing about male authors it appears that fewer questions are asked.⁴ A highly problematic attitude to the relative “worth” of male and female literary production seems evident here. To paraphrase Colwill, for female critics to write about work by men is to raise their status; for male critics to write about women’s work is to lower theirs.

³ See, for example, Wendy Roy’s essay “*Unless* the World Changes: Carol Shields on Women’s Silencing in Contemporary Culture,” *Carol Shields: The Arts of a Writing Life*, ed. Neil K. Besner (Winnipeg: Prairie Fire, 2003) 125–31.

⁴ Female critics of my acquaintance working on Richardson, Ballard and Hare report that they are rarely, if ever, asked why they have chosen to write about a male author.

In Shields's case, her categorization as a "woman's writer" was something that she tended to view ambivalently. "I don't think of [the] reader as being a particular sex," she told Marjorie Anderson in 1995, noting that her decision to write her second novel *Happenstance* (1980) from a male perspective was, in part, a way of challenging the reductive classification of her first two novels *Small Ceremonies* (1976) and *The Box Garden* (1977) as "women's fiction" (Shields qtd. in Anderson 141). As late as 2002, however, the Canadian critic Stephen Henighan offers the following definition of the typical Shields reader: "a conservative upper-middle-class woman" (183). Overlooking the gender and class prejudices underpinning this assessment,⁵ Henighan's generalized statement stands as a further endorsement of a simplistic relationship between author and audience, articulating a presumption that texts "by" women must necessarily be "for" women alone.

In such a cultural climate, fiction and theory which encourages readers to negotiate between male and female perspectives, thereby challenging the notion of fixed gender positions and their attendant hierarchies, retains a particularly subversive potential, and the latter sections of this essay will explore the ways in which Shields's fiction may be seen to accomplish this. As Kobena Mercer has argued, the "mantra of 'race, class, gender'" may lead to reductive literalist assumptions about consumption and identity, for example, the notion that black readers can only "identify" with black characters, male readers with male characters, and so on (193). Mercer suggests, in contrast, that "the complexity of what actually happens 'between' the contingent spaces [of such categories] . . . is something only now coming into view theoretically" (193). I would concur that as popular discourse on identity categories grows increasingly divisive, we require both literary and theoretical texts that provide a counter-narrative, allowing male and female readers more room for movement between gender and other identity positions. To this end, a number of literary critics have engaged with issues of readership and identification, recognizing the question of who we identify with when reading as a complex one that often transgresses, rather than merely reaffirms, prescribed social roles. In *Sexuality and the Reading Encounter* (1996), Emma Wilson develops a theoretical paradigm to examine such concepts, arguing for the potential for change in the reader's identity through the act of reading. Ranging across texts by Duras, Proust, Tournier and Cixous, Wilson explores what she terms "the *formative* power

⁵ A dismissive attitude to female writers and female readers is evident throughout Henighan's *When Words Deny the World: The Reshaping of Canadian Writing*, in particular in his discussions of work by Shields (181–85), Jane Urquhart (185–87) and Barbara Gowdy (198–200), as I have argued elsewhere (Ramon 4–9; 19).

of the reading encounter," the ways in which a literary text "may offer the reader new images of him or herself . . . with which to identify and new scenarios for the performance of an identity category" (6; emphasis added). The reader's self, Wilson argues, may be continually reviewed and revised when engaged in the reading of a literary text:

[T]he reading encounter may then be said to be formative: the reader not only recognizes in the text what she or he knows to be true of him or herself . . . she or he may also be able to perceive aspects of the self which were previously occluded and unknown. It is the encounter with and the liberation of these aspects of the self which . . . work to transform the reader, allowing him or her to be effectively changed by the work of the texts. (30)

Wilson's work here complexifies conventional conceptions of the reader-text relationship, challenging the notion that readers automatically identify with characters who are superficially "like" them and placing the emphasis instead upon fluidity and (ex-)change. Issues of cross-gender and trans-sex identification are a central concern of her study which places considerable emphasis upon the potential of the reading encounter to challenge "the foundational illusions of identity and the illusory polarities of male and female, masculine and feminine, straight and gay" (195).

Wilson's view of the capacity of fiction to challenge and change the reader's sense of self has been articulated in different yet interrelated formulations by a number of contemporary novelists, including Shields. "If writing . . . and reading [novels] have any redeeming social value," Margaret Atwood suggests, "it's probably that they force you to imagine what it's like to be someone else" (430). "When I have read a long novel," Jane Smiley concurs, "when I have entered systematically into a sensibility that is not mine . . . there is a possibility that at the end . . . I will be a degree more able to see the world as another sees it" (175). Atwood's and Smiley's view of the transformative potential of fiction was shared by Shields for whom issues of cross-gender readership and identification remained central.

"Why [do] people read fiction at all?" Shields wondered in a 2001 interview, going on to provide her own answer. "Because our own lives aren't big enough, wide enough, varied enough for us. Through fiction we expand our existence, which is always going to be confining" (Shields qtd. in Garner 2001). Over ten years earlier, Shields had articulated a similar viewpoint, this time from the perspective of the writer:

One of the rewards, compensations perhaps, of being a writer is the freedom to leave one's own skin and see with another's eyes. Old eyes,

young eyes, male eyes . . . Surely there is always some refreshment in taking a different perspective. The world is made new. (Shields qtd. in De Roo 43)

“By becoming something other than ourselves,” Shields suggests, “[we may achieve] an angle of vision that renews our image of the world” (“Ticking Clock” 88).

Like Wilson, Shields does not necessarily present such “dissident identifications” (Wilson 195) as unproblematic, or as easily achieved. Indeed, her essay “The Same Ticking Clock” rigorously examines the challenges inherent for both writer and reader in moving beyond “the tight little outlines of our official résumés” (88). Nonetheless, Shields’s remarks share with Wilson’s work a sense of the subversive potential of reading against gender (and other) binaries. As Diana Fuss has argued: “[t]he act of reading may constitute a performance [or series of performances] where the reader assumes the position with which she [*sic*] chooses to identify . . . If we read from multiple subject-positions the very act of reading becomes a force for dislocating our belief in stable subjects and essential meanings” (35). For Fuss, as for Wilson, the recognition of identity categories as fictional serves to “undo hegemonic relations between male and female, homosexual and heterosexual” (35), thereby disrupting totalizing fantasies of stable subject formation and fixed identity.

Certainly my own experience of reading and writing about Shields’s work remains one of pleasurable and challenging engagement with a multiplicity of voices and perspectives: male and female, young, middle-aged and elderly, first- and third- person. The capacity of fiction to “expand our existence,” its potential to enable both reader and writer to “become something other than [themselves],” is not only a central concern of her interviews and her literary criticism; it is also enacted within her work. Innovative in their use of perspective, Shields’s short stories including “Various Miracles,” “Home,” “Dressing Up for the Carnival,” “Keys” and “Soup du Jour” seem constructed specifically to allow the reader to adopt as many identifications as possible, moving through an array of subject positions and focalizations within a limited textual space.⁶ The choric qualities of the Shieldsian short story actively encourage fluid reader identifications, as they encompass the experiences of a diversity of protagonists and make the mutability of personal identity one of their abiding thematic motifs. In Lorna Irvine’s terms:

⁶ Simone Vauthier has sensitively explored the implications of point-of-view in Shields in two essays: “On Carol Shields’s ‘Mrs. Turner Cutting the Grass’.” *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 11.2 (1989): 63–74; and “‘They Say Miracles Are Past’ but They Are Wrong.” *Prairie Fire* 16.1 (1995): 84–104.

Shields does not want her readers to settle into a relaxing fictional environment, but prefers to unsettle them, persistently using perspectives and voices that abruptly jump back and forth between internal and external spaces and between past, present and even future tenses. . . . Readers of Shields's fiction need considerable flexibility; their position as narratees is repeatedly thrown into question. (144)

Within a fragmentary yet fluid collage structure, Shields's stories often construct moments of brief epiphany in which characters "see [themselves] freshly," achieving a transcendence of their daily routine through performance and "disguise" (*Collected Stories* 398, 409). Tobias Hill, indeed, interprets "Dressing Up for the Carnival" as a story "about drag" (Hill 2000), noting in particular the text's final reference to "X, an anonymous middle-aged citizen who, sometimes, in the privacy of his own bedroom, in the embrace of happiness, waltzes about in his wife's lace-trimmed night gown" (*Collected Stories* 403). As the protagonists of the story survive the day by "putting on costumes" (397) that alert them to new possibilities of identity and experience so Shields's fiction invites its readers to cross-dress, to don and discard the attire of a wide variety of characters, and perhaps emerge changed by these brief encounters. Thus Coral Ann Howells reads "Dressing Up for the Carnival" in the context of Shields's comments about the value of the subjunctive mood: that "world of dreams, possibilities and parallel realities" to which Shields believes it is part of fiction's function to alert us (Shields qtd. in Howells 145).

In terms of gender and Shields's wider literary output, the dual structure of the *Happenstance* novels (1980 and 1983), of *Swann* (1987), *A Celibate Season* (1991) and *The Republic of Love* (1992), exemplifies the author's commitment to giving male and female perspectives equal significance within her work. The splitting of these texts between the narratives of Brenda and Jack, Sarah and Jimroy, Rose and Cruzzi, Jock and Chas, and Tom and Fay, serves as an invitation to the reader to read productively across and against gender binaries, allowing him or her to respond to male and female characters on entirely equivalent terms. While fully alert to the historical differences in male and female relationships to issues of culture and power, Shields's fiction interrogates an essentialist approach to gender difference. Challenging patriarchal myths of male heroism and agency versus female passivity, the lives of her male characters are shown by such narrative structures to be equally contingent, equally prone to the vagaries of accident, chance and "ordinary good and bad luck" (*Larry's Party* 249), as those of her female characters. As such, the "play . . . with distance and closeness, with report and question, with writerly versus readerly construction" (146) that Irvine identifies as central to Shields's narrative methods is revealed to be intimately connected to her text's subversive

“play” with gender positions. At the level of both form and content, the division of these texts between gender perspectives may also work to unsettle the reader’s sense of identity, perhaps alerting them to what the narrator of *Larry’s Party* terms “the wayward chips of self” (240) that emerge to challenge prescribed social roles.

The potential of fiction to disclose alternative modes of being to the receptive reader is also explored at the diegetic level in Shields’s work, which consistently presents both the reading encounter and the writing act as liberating and transformative processes. “Print is her way of entering and escaping the world,” Shields writes of the unnamed actress at the end of “Various Miracles,” a reader of “South American novels, Russian folk tales, Persian poetry [and] the advertisements on the subway” (*Collected Stories* 28). This character, finding page 46 of a lost manuscript in a doorway, reads it and discovers her own immediate experience described on the page. This notion of the text itself as just such a liminal space—a threshold that offers both entrance and escape—resonates throughout Shields’s production, in which reader and writer figures and biographical subjects from Susanna Moodie to Jane Austen experience transcendence through textual engagement. One thinks, in particular, of Daisy’s invigorating metamorphosis into “Mrs. Green Thumb” via the writing of her gardening column in *The Stone Diaries* (197–228) and the character’s imaginative excursions into the lives of both male and female “others” throughout the novel. But for our purposes the most significant *reading* encounter occurs elsewhere in *The Stone Diaries*, namely in Magnus Flett’s obsessive engagement with, and eventual memorization of, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.⁷ In Magnus’s text-fixated response to his wife Clarentine’s abandonment, Shields stages an encounter between a male reader and a female-authored literary texts that proves influential and transformative:

[Magnus] read slowly since, truth be told, he’d never before in his life read the whole of a book, not cover to cover. It pleased him to think he could puzzle out most of the words, turning the pages over one by one, paying attention . . . *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë . . . was his favorite: there were turnings in the story that filled the back of his throat with smarting, sweet pains, and in those moments he felt his wife only a dozen heartbeats away, so close he could almost reach out and stroke the silkiness of her inner thighs. It astonished him, how these books

⁷ The wider implications of the intertextual relationship between *Jane Eyre* and *The Stone Diaries* have been explored by Diane Osland in “*The Stone Diaries, Jane Eyre, and the Burden of Romance*.” See *Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction*, eds. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2003) 84–112.

were stuffed full of people. Each one was like a little world, populated and furnished. And the way those book people talked! Some of the phrases were like poetry, nothing like the way folks really spoke, but nevertheless he pronounced them aloud to himself and committed them to memory, so that if by chance his wife should decide to come home, he would be ready. (100)

The question of who Magnus identifies with when reading *Jane Eyre* is not one that *The Stone Diaries* directly addresses; indeed the narrative of his encounter with the text may be entirely based around Daisy's imaginative construction of the event.⁸ What is significant, however, is that Magnus's engagement with Brontë's novel—and the other “ladies' books” discovered in Clarentine's sewing basket (*Stone* 99–100)—provides him with a language with which to articulate and respond to “feminine” desire: the reading encounter here is, in Wilson's terms, embodied, sensual and experiential, serving to displace and replace the real. “He made [the book] his,” Shields stated in interview. “It was a whole other dimension, another world to live in besides the one he was stuck in” (Shields qtd. in Denoon 12). Via this paradigmatic example of what a “female” text might productively “do” for a male reader Shields self-consciously confronts issues of gender and readership within her own work. “Turning the pages . . . paying attention,” Shields's readers, like Magnus Flett, find themselves fully immersed in that “other dimension” that fiction provides.

CONCLUSION

The suggestion that we need male critics to read, write about and teach the work of female authors, just as urgently as we need female critics to be reading, writing about and teaching work by men, may seem a commonplace in 2011. However, I would argue that it is an idea that requires reiterating as a counter-position to the gender segregations which are increasingly prevalent in literary culture and in popular culture more widely. While the notion of gender metamorphosis, on the part of reader or author, may never be entirely unproblematic, it remains both necessary and subversive at a time when such reading and writing practices appear to be under threat, and limiting definitions of masculinity and femininity reas-

⁸ Debate about the extent of Daisy's agency as narrator of *The Stone Diaries* has been considerable. See, for example, Winifred M. Mellor's “‘The Simple Container of Our Existence’: Narrative Ambiguity in Carol Shields's *The Stone Diaries*,” *Studies in Canadian Literature* 20.2 (1995): 96–110, and Wendy Roy's “Autobiography As Critical Practice in *The Stone Diaries*,” *Carol Shields, Narrative Hunger, and the Possibilities of Fiction*, eds. Edward Eden and Dee Goertz (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2003) 113–46.

serting themselves. As Steinem wryly notes: “[d]igging out that ‘masculine/feminine’ paradigm undermines all birth-based hierarchies, and alters our view of human nature, the natural world, and the cosmos itself. Just a few little things like that” (270). It is my suggestion that a committed practice of reading and writing across gender binaries may contribute in a small way to the kinds of processes that Steinem outlines here.

Shields’s endeavour to offer participatory and potentially transformative reading experiences in relation to gender roles is well summarized by Warren Cariou in his discussion of the conclusion of *Larry’s Party*, Shields’s most celebrated attempt at rendering male experience in her fiction. At the end of the novel, Cariou suggests,

[the] dinner party . . . announces a change in [Larry’s] approach to gender roles . . . because it reveals Larry to be for the first time an active participant in those roles. Larry is not the uncommunicative couch potato that his own father was, nor is he the free-wheeling tomcat of the masculine postmodern novel, nor the reactive backlasher of concern to feminists, nor the predator, nor the buffoon. He has become instead a man for whom there is as yet no available template, a man who is not effeminate but who also understands and deeply appreciates what the women in his life have meant to him . . . By placing himself in the social role of a Mrs. Dalloway figure, Larry unknowingly creates the maze of gender anew for himself. (92)

Shields’s construction of male characters for whom there is “as yet no available template” remains an undervalued aspect of her work, representing as it does a significant challenge to traditional conceptions of masculinity, and, by extension, to conventional assumptions about gendered reading patterns. The richly imagined protagonists that populate Shields’s texts allow her fiction to consistently “create the maze of gender anew” for readers, critics and characters, male and female alike.

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