

## PREFACE

How do women get the authority to speak when, to repeat Susan Gubar's deployment of Cora Kaplan's brilliant formulation, "All feminisms give some ideological hostage to femininities and are constructed through the gender sexuality of their day as well as standing in opposition to them"? This issue of *Feminist Studies* comes together around themes of voice, identity, and historical moment. Four articles explore these themes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, adding rich new perspectives about these pivotal eras which continue to set the terms for many current debates. Others bring the tensions within feminism and among women into more contemporary contexts.

We take a certain delight in noting the "political incorrectness" of Susan Gubar's, "Feminist Misogyny: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Paradox of 'It Takes One to Know One,'" which offers a revisionistic reading of Mary Wollstonecraft as a feminist misogynist. Feminists, after all, have always gotten into difficulty for being politically troublesome. What Gubar underlines is a tension within feminist practice. Because the category of woman has been constructed by a patriarchal social discourse, feminists almost by definition resist, attack, and deny this social construction of "femininity." Gubar's piece picks at this "ideological hostage" knot and illuminates the problem that still needs resolution today: How can feminists critique the gender ideology of their society without standing in opposition to "women" and "femininities"?

Lenard R. Berlanstein's detailed historical examination of the place of actresses at the Comédie-Française ("Women and Power in Eighteenth-Century France: Actresses at the Comédie-Française") provides fascinating information on women in politics from an unexpected arena. Actresses participated in governing this cultural institution which played a significant role in shaping the public sphere of eighteenth-century France. Berlanstein tests current debates about the antifeminist forces in the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and proposes a subtle shift to incorporate the limitations he uncovers in the pre-Revolutionary era. A fascinating subtext this debate raises is how interpretations of the exercise of power have historically been gendered. The Comédie-Française actresses, when they exercised power like their male counterparts, were abhorred as illegitimate, dangerous, and irrational—defined by their private behavior and sexuality.

The same kind of cultural history can be seen at work in Jane E. Kromm's essay on "The Feminization of Madness in Visual Representation." In tracing the historical shift from male-dominant to female-domi-

nant representations of madness in Europe through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Kromm's work clarifies the background against which Wollstonecraft wrote. As madness (for men) became associated with a loss of reason, the physical aggressiveness of the "raving lunatic" was displaced on to women in the visual representations Kromm explores.

Berlanstein's point that gender is performance as much as construction is carried further in Amy Robinson's piece on a relatively unknown nineteenth-century text, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*. Robinson explores the authorizing strategies of Seacole, a West Indian Creole who served as a nurse in the Crimean War. By speaking the position of an "authentic" national—as well as gender and class—identity, this "yellow" woman both authorized herself and subverted the notion of an authentic British subject. Robinson notes how Seacole created a space from which to appropriate her many roles (nurse, mother, entrepreneur) "by placing herself as the normative exception to examples of race and gender inversion." In Gubar's reading of Wollstonecraft's work, Wollstonecraft clearly situated herself as the normative exception to the gender "woman" and in so doing eerily echoed the works "composed by masculinist satirists." It is not too much of a stretch to note these similarities between women in patriarchal societies and colonized people in imperial societies in the nineteenth century. In negotiating their identities, Wollstonecraft and Seacole had to perform within the tight space of an already constructed binary.

Opal Palmer Adisa's "Bathroom Graffiti Series" offer a contemporary illustration of the inevitable tensions among women. The poem mocks the mother who cannot understand her daughter's defiance of the culture of beauty. But the daughter's criticism of the mother's lack of self-esteem may also be read as itself a product of psychological manipulation that results in "feminist misogyny." By contrast Julie Kane's poem about Laura Cereta confronts us with the long history of silencing and the fate of women who find a voice only to discover that there is no one to listen.

Sylvia Bowerbank and Dolores Nawagesic Wawia's review essay on Native Canadian women's literature shifts the problem of voice to recent generations. The review describes transcriptions of elderly women's oral traditions, spoken with unquestioned authority and authenticity. Their granddaughters, however, writing in English, struggle to find an authentic voice without the authorizing strategies of a Mary Seacole.

Finally, Rosemarie Garland Thomson's review of recent writings on women and disability evokes once again the power of representation to

shape reality. The author proposes to bring together feminist and disability studies. "By extending the borders of feminist disability studies to include discourses of the body marked as deviant, I want to render it a more capacious category of analysis than the specialized field it may now seem to be." She offers a fitting conclusion to an issue which establishes clearly that the political importance of representations of women resides "not in [their] stability but in [their] historical variation."

Sara Evans and Shirley Geok-lin Lim,  
for the editors