

Feminism in Eighteenth Century England, Katharine M Rogers, University of Illinois Press 1982 ISBN 0 252 00900 2 (UK distributor, Harvester Press) hb £25 29 1pp

Reason's Disciples: Seventeenth Century English Feminists, Hilda I. Smith, University of Illinois Press 1982 ISBN 0 252 009126 £16.50 237pp

One by-product of the movement for women's suffrage was the installation of Mary Wollstonecraft as fore-mother of nineteenth century feminism. From Mrs Fawcett's edition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1891 to Ray Strachey's valediction of it as 'the text of the movement' in *The Cause* (1928) a labour of popularization and rehabilitation was carried out to great effect. It will be interesting to see, by the time the present feminist movement runs its course, whether a similar work of recovery of seventeenth century feminism will have been achieved. There has been a discernible swell of interest in this earlier feminism in the last ten years, although the material is not yet accessible enough to allow of wider discussions.

The activity of historical recovery is not, after all, without its wider significance. Mary Wollstonecraft's integration into the history of nineteenth century feminism had two major effects. In the first place it served to help link feminism to the philosophy of the rights of man and to indigenous traditions of political radicalism. In the second, it became part and parcel of an orthodox history which defined feminism as a *social movement* above all else, whose theory and practice went hand in hand. Mary Wollstonecraft plays the part of harbinger, exceptional in her isolation.

Study of the seventeenth century feminists, however, tends to encourage the dissolution and questioning of such connexions and definitions. Almost to a woman these feminists were politically conservative, royalist rather than roundhead. Their allegiances did not lie where radicals and socialists are by now used to look for their antecedents. Bathsua Makin was governess to the children of Charles I. Margaret Cavendish was lady-in-waiting to his queen and married one of his generals in the war with parliament.

As for feminism as a social movement, the demonstrable existence of a feminism prior to *A Vindication* could suggest that the social movement is one important form of feminism rather than being of its essence. Already, closer inspection of a 'quiescent period' like the nineteen twenties and thirties has revealed its importance as a time of reorientation and transformation of the terms of the feminist argument. It might well be that the theorization of feminism has a history separable from, even if related to, the practical politics of organized movements.

So is there a consistent feminism existing prior to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*? Two recent books furnish, in varying degrees, some of the material which could help to answer such a question. Hilda I. Smith's *Reason's Disciples* takes a close look at a dozen feminists writing between 1650 and 1720 and provides an excellent bibliography, and her book will no doubt become a standard academic introduction to the topic of seventeenth century political feminism.

Since centuries are not very good delimiters, Katharine M Rogers's *Feminism in Eighteenth Century England* covers some of the same ground at the beginning, but is much less rigorous in its selection. This book's main problem is its discursiveness, which results from the marriage of an unhelpfully broad notion of feminist awareness to an extreme conventionality of method.

Ms Rogers has examined much of the product of women writers in the eighteenth century and some of the male writers too – Swift, Defoe, Richardson, among others – in search of 'feminist feeling'. By this she means an awareness of women's special

position, needs and problems as well as sympathy towards them. Since, in a novel form with aspirations to realism, the creation of male and female characters tends to stress their difference in situation, needs and problems, it is hardly surprising that she finds 'some evidence of feminist feeling in practically all the innumerable women writers of the period', and in many of the male writers too. No distinctions are drawn between authors' approaches – Swift is as feminist as Defoe in her account. And the employment of the term 'feminist' is often bewilderingly vague. What does it mean, for example, to describe a character created by Maria Edgeworth as 'an attractive radical feminist'? Or to claim that Lady Mary Wortley Montagu 'ruthlessly suppressed feminist feelings'? Caught in a net which trawls so wide, feminism ends up meaning all and nothing.

In order to demonstrate her catch of feminism in literature Ms Rogers presents plot summaries, for example, in a form calculated to display feminist sympathies. Novels therefore become treated as surrogate statements of opinion about the position of women, in itself a questionable procedure. In consequence, the narrative falls all too easily into the tooth-grinding tedium of a catalogue of heroines' fates and authors' attitudes.

Hilda Smith is much more precise in her aim, which is to link feminist views produced in seventeenth century England to 'a central theme of later feminist movements – namely the understanding of women as a group with identifiable sociological characteristics'. This sociological approach allows her to read the relevant texts for their criticism of the impact of differential schooling for example, a common theme of post-Restoration feminism. Bathsua Makin, Hannah Woolley and Elizabeth Elstob were all teachers or governesses, and Mary Astell's *Serious Proposal* was for a female academy which would not only prepare women for marriage, but provide women with the means of pursuing alternatives to marriage.

Feminine characteristics like ignorance and folly resulted from their circumscribed existence, they claimed. Restrictions on women's free movement was interpreted as evidence of men's tyranny. 'Men are happy,' wrote Margaret Cavendish 'and we women are miserable . . . Men are so unconscionable and Cruel against us, that they endeavour to bar us of all sorts of Liberty, and will fain bury us in in their houses or Beds, as in a Grave. The truth is we live like Batts, or Owls, labour like Beasts and dye like Worms.' Social changes could free women from their dark, subterranean existence, and a different life for women would produce a different type of woman. Equality of educational opportunity was to have this sort of meaning for feminists right through to the end of the nineteenth century.

Yet I believe that the stress on this sociological aspect is misplaced. When Margaret Cavendish also wrote, 'in Nature we have as clear an understanding as Men, if we were bred in Schools to mature our Brains and to manure our Understandings, that we might bring forth the Fruits of Knowledge', she was expressing a theme which was much more central to the seventeenth century feminists – that of equality rather than difference.

The main thing that was new in the seventeenth century feminists was their claim that women were equal members of the human species, with an equal capacity for learning, since 'soul had no sex' and intellectual ability, through the application of reason, was not sex-determined. This was the foundation from which a demand for equality in education and a criticism of bias in education could be made. Hilda Smith's emphasis on their 'group-centred understanding of women', her assertion that 'their most significant contribution' was insight into 'the sociological definition of sex roles' ultimately distorts the material she has so painstakingly assembled. Later feminist themes have been given primacy over earlier feminist views.

This subtle distortion of the material which comes about as a result of its refraction through the lens of a later sociological feminism also helps to obscure what

it was that was radical about the post Restoration feminists – not their politics, but their philosophy.

Reason's Disciples treats this feminism almost as if it were a delayed response on the part of women to the ideas of English revolutionaries (an approach reminiscent of Viola Klein's concept of the evolutionary lag in social development between men and women). However, it is quite clear from the material and from her presentation of it that the feminist position arose out of an application of Cartesian principles and Lockeian rationalism to the case of women. Both Descartes and Locke subscribed to a concept of the individual subject as thinking, sentient being, able to apprehend the external world through sense perception and complemented by a God who created the world through the mechanism of laws which could be discovered and understood. Reason stood as mediator between man and God rather than revelation. As a philosophic stance, it is hostile to militant protestantism, and provides the intellectual and political key to the work of Mary Astell, Judith Drake and even Maragaret Cavendish, who had certainly met Descartes, even if she claimed that she never listened to a word he said.

It is an effect of the employment of a sociological perspective that the history gets obscured. There is hardly any sense in *Reason's Disciples* that the late seventeenth century was a time of amazing confusion and development, within which early feminism played its part. On so many issues – the struggles over the new philosophy, the new science, the vernacular versus the classics, methods of learning and teaching – feminists took the part of modernism against the ancients, but little of this comes through.

This is not to imply that they were thoroughly and completely modern. One of the book's disappointments is that what is alien is occluded. Hannah Woolley, for example, is praised for her pragmatism, which was certainly one of her qualities. That this pragmatism encompassed an empiricism which has as much to do with witchcraft (slitting the throat of a live mole and mixing its blood with white wine to be drunk at the full moon is not untypical of her recipes) as anything else, is glossed over. Nowadays it is hard to suppress a smile at Mrs Fawcett's description of Mary Wollstonecraft as a paragon of all the domestic virtues, but the extraction of what is understandable to us from these seventeenth century texts seems to me to have a similar sanitizing effect.

Yet by giving a detailed inspection of these seventeenth century feminist women, Hilda Smith has allowed others a key to the library catalogues. It is a contribution which in the long term should do much to help widen awareness and debate over the different strands of the feminist inheritance.

Roosalind Delmar

Family Time and Industrial Time, Tamara Hareven, Cambridge University Press 1982. ISBN 0 521 23094 Hb., 0 521 28914 Pb., £25 Hb., £9.95 Pb., 474pp.

Feminists have for a long time focused on both the family and employment as key areas in which women's subordination is shaped and perpetuated. An understanding of the relationship between the two has often proved a puzzling and formidable task. So often we have had to satisfy ourselves with the frustrating conclusion that the two are mutually reinforcing, but with very little sense of precisely how. Everyone who is