

Kathy Mezei, ed.. *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. vii + 286 pp. \$55.00, library, ISBN 978-0-8078-2290-6.



Reviewed by Mary A. Procida

Published on H-Women (September, 1997)

Literary scholars have long recognized the importance of narrative. It is only recently, however, that this conscious study and theorizing of narrative as a discursive form has attracted a growing number of scholars in other disciplines. In a recent article in *The American Historical Review*,^[1] for example, Sarah Maza traces historians' burgeoning interest in narrative as both historical source and scholarly tool. Among the major influences she cites for this shift in historical theory and practice are feminism and interdisciplinary cultural studies, which she defines as the context for "the always uneasy dialogue between historical and literary studies."^[2] Thus, the essays collected in *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers* and edited by Kathy Mezei, are propitiously situated at the intersection of several different disciplines, with the possibility of speaking to an academic audience beyond the confines of literary studies. While such intellectual "crossovers" offer many provocative openings for the applicability of insights in one field, in this case literary criticism, to another area, such as history, they also highlight the conceptual and practical differences that con-

tinue to make dialogue across disciplinary boundaries challenging and, often, frustrating.

The volume's primary audience is clearly those readers who are already immersed in the scholarly literature on narrative. Mezei, for example, mentions in an aside in her introduction, that "readers of this collection of essays will undoubtedly be familiar with the emergence of a poetics of narrative through the disparate conduits of structural anthropology, linguistics, Saussurian semiotics, and Russian formalism" (p. 2). Those less well-versed in the scholarly premises of the collection may find it difficult, initially, to grasp the definitional and conceptual framework underpinning the volume. The thirteen pieces in *Ambiguous Discourse* all focus on the theme of feminist narratology. Mezei's introduction defines "narratology" as, quite simply, "the science of narratives," and "feminist narratology" equally straightforwardly as "the study of narrative structures and strategies in the context of cultural constructions of gender" (p. 7). Some essays fit nicely within these definitional parameters, hewing closely to traditional conceptions of narrative as

the recital of a story or sequence of events. The broad and axiomatic nature of these definitions, however, provides the uninitiated reader with little guidance for digesting those essays that venture beyond commonplace usage of "narrative". Rachel Blau DuPlessis's piece on the poet Mina Loy, for example, which finds in Loy's works a correlation between sexual intercourse and narrative structure, deviates widely from a straightforward notion of narrative. Definitional problems thus obscure any broader applicability for DuPlessis's narrow analysis of Loy's works.

The other unifying theme of the collection is "feminism" and the authors differ here, as well, in their deployment of the term. None of the essays provides a clear-cut definition of feminism—which is, perhaps, an impossible task—but all seem implicitly to agree that feminism, feminist literature and a feminist narratology exist. The underlying assumption of most of the essays appears to be that the dominant ideology and narrative structure of Western literature has been and continues to be patriarchal, but that, if we analyze certain texts with a conscious sensitivity to feminist concerns, we can discern a narrative strategy subversive of this dominant patriarchy. The final piece in the collection, Linda Hutcheon's brief essay on "Incredulity Toward Metanarrative," which discusses feminism and post-modernism, provides some hints as to the constitutive elements of feminism, and might more profitably have been placed at the beginning of the volume. Nonetheless, the reader, at least if she/he works in another discipline, remains more bewildered than enlightened about the nature of feminism, at least as understood by the editor and authors of this volume.

The collection also illustrates one of the major methodological differences that, according to Maza, sets apart literary scholars from historians (and, presumably, scholars in other disciplines, as well). While historians tend to analyze literary genres as a whole (e.g., melodrama, the crime narrative), literary scholars prefer to concentrate on

a more limited body of individual works. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the pieces in *Ambiguous Discourse* generally focus on one work or one author. Nevertheless, the selective reader can glean from many of these essays conceptual and methodological insights that can profitably be applied to fields far removed from literary criticism. As a historian of women and of gender who often works with narratives by women, for instance, I garnered many ideas that could be applied to the historical, as well as the literary, analysis of texts.

Several of the essays, for example, point to the importance of reading a narrative as a consciously constructed text. Kathy Mezei's piece, "Who's Speaking Here," although marred by the excessive use of the "jargony" acronym "FID" (for "free indirect discourse"), highlights the often ambiguous coexistence of multiple narrators (i.e., author, textual narrator, characters) within a single text. The reader must not only refrain from conflating this multiplicity of narratorial voices, but also interrogate their different roles within the text. Other essays discuss the common narrative trajectory of Western literature whose culmination is the marriage of the female protagonist. Christine Roulston's study of "Discourse, Gender and Gossip" in Jane Austin's *Emma*, Susan Stanford Friedman's piece on "Spatialization, Narrative Theory, and Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*," and Janet Giltrow's analysis of "Ironies of Politeness in Anita Brookner's *Hotel du Lac*" discuss different authorial strategies through which a feminist narrative can invert, subvert, or controvert the standard patriarchal narrative.

As feminist scholars in many different fields have discovered, women's texts and other cultural products associated with women are often ignored or devalued by contemporaries, scholars, and the general public alike. Several of the essays, such as Roulston and Giltrow's pieces, and Melba Cuddy-Keane's contribution on "The Rhetoric of Feminist Conversation," spotlight frequently overlooked modes of feminine discourse. Roulston, for

instance, examines the social function of gossip. Although gossip is, in many respects, a quintessentially feminine, and hence private, mode of discourse, it is nonetheless "circulated in a public manner" and plays a crucial role in shaping "male and female subjectivities" (p. 55). Cuddy-Keane analyzes the feminine discourse of conversation (as opposed to the masculine lecture, essay, or tract, for example). As she points out, conversation means the "exchange of different views" (p. 137). Thus, although conversation is popularly construed as a "light" discourse, it can be, in the hands of a feminist author, the expression of "conscientious political action" (p. 137). Giltrow's essay on politeness points out the varied ways in which social formalities can be deployed to achieve different meanings, often totally oppositional to their superficial constructions. Such contradictory usage of social formulas can thus undermine the dominant patriarchal framework of Western literary narrative.

For those uninitiated in literary theory, the essays in *Ambiguous Discourse* leave many unanswered questions. Perhaps the authors would have been well-served to interrogate their own narrative ends by analyzing whether such things as feminist narratives (as well as feminist grammar and female sentences) standing in opposition to patriarchal narratives exist and how they are to be defined. Indeed, few of the pieces manage to break out of the limited and limiting binary opposition of (subversive) feminist discourse versus (oppressive) patriarchal narrative. One notable exception is Friedman's essay on Woolf's *The Voyage Out*, in which she discusses the interplay of empire, capitalism and patriarchy to create a richer and more rewarding context for explication of feminist narrative strategies. Her work indicates, in part, the unfulfilled promise of several other pieces in the collection. Furthermore, the collection as a whole might have been more stimulating and more attractive to a less specialized readership had a wider range of writers been discussed. Of the twelve pieces included in *Ambiguous Dis-*

course, in addition to the introduction, seven discuss either Jane Austin or Virginia Woolf. The emphasis on Woolf is readily comprehended; as an author she consciously sought to undermine the dominant patriarchal discourse through experimentation with various forms of explicitly feminist narrative. The less-understandable focus on Austin is perhaps explained by the authors' desire to use feminist narratology as "a method for reclaiming Jane Austin as a feminist novelist," as Robyn Warhol states (p. 21). (Why we should want or need to do this, and why this feminist reclamation project should focus on Austin rather than the Brontes, say, or George Eliot, remains unclear.) Indeed, the definitional issues that bedevil this volume--specifically, what constitutes feminist narratology--might have been better illuminated if the collection had covered other British women writers who were less experimental, less subversive, and less explicitly feminist than Woolf and Austin. Then, such interesting questions as the connections between female/feminine writing and the conscious or unconscious development of feminist narrative(s) might have been both more fully explored and more accessible to those working outside the field of literary criticism.

Notes:

[1]. Sarah Maza, "Stories in History: Cultural Narratives in Recent Works in European History," *American Historical Review* 101: 5 (Dec. 1996): 1493-1515.

[2]. Maza, 1496. The other major influence on historical uses of narrative, according to Maza, has been the recent convergence of anthropology and social history.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-women>

Citation: Mary A. Procida. Review of Mezei, Kathy, ed. *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. September, 1997.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1265>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.