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Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination

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Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven and London: Yale U. Press, 1979. 719pp. \$25.00

The Madwoman in the Attic begins splendidly. Drawing on an impressive number of sources, its overture shows that literary creation has traditionally been described in metaphors connected with male sexuality, a form of psychological discrimination particularly invidious to the woman writer's self-image. So long as Gilbert and Gubar discuss the means, both overt and covert, by which women were/are inhibited from literary participation, they remain persuasive and cogent. Indeed, their first chapter gives a most succinct, lucid account of the difficulties which women authors must confront. Excerpts from "The Metaphor of Literary Paternity" deserve to be reprinted often in texts for composition and beginning women's studies courses. To be sure, the argument will help stimulate advanced classes; in addition, the firm tone will inform without, I think, alienating students in introductory classes. The discussions of how specific writers cope with these problems, however, vary greatly in quality and persuasiveness. *The Madwoman in the Attic* contains both over-ingenuity in supporting a thesis, a temptation for all scholars; and a bias against writers who do not conform to a desired pattern, a temptation for scholars with any particularly strong ideological commitment. Nevertheless, the book insists on a response, a clarification of one's objections; many readers will be provoked, I expect, to a flurry of sometimes appreciative, sometimes argumentative marginalia.

After describing the predicament of the woman writer, Gilbert and Gubar differentiate the attitude of women writers toward their predecessors from the Oedipal male attitudes suggested by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence*. Unable to challenge the literary establishment in the same way as men, women writers have adopted elaborate ruses to hide their rebellions. This desire to rebel inevitably coexists with the desire to accept and conform to social norms, and the nineteenth-century literature produced by women authors reflects this authorial split in madwomen who double not only the heroines but the writers themselves.

The title of this work refers, of course, to Bertha Rochester, and, not surprisingly since *Jane Eyre* provides the paradigm of the doubling pattern, the chapter on Charlotte Brontë illuminates all the

texts, particularly *Villette*. Gilbert and Gubar's framework enhances our understanding, for example, of Lucy Snowe's swings toward and away from emotion by exploring the other characters as fragmented reflections of Lucy's (and Charlotte Brontë's) character. In turn, this fragmentation explains a part of *Villette* which has puzzled readers since its publication: the exact basis of Lucy Snowe's attraction to Catholicism. Catholicism, which in Brontë's view encourages an independent and bestial sensuality and at the same time promotes childish dependence on priests, sanctions Lucy's schizophrenic selves. At its best *The Madwoman in the Attic* suggests both new questions—where in a writer's work does her inevitable rage appear?—and new answers to old critical riddles.

Other sections remain problematic. One might feel uneasy with the statement that "*Frankenstein* is ultimately a mock *Paradise Lost* ... Not just the striking omission of any obvious Eve-figure from this 'woman's book' about Milton, but also the barely concealed sexual components of the story as well as our earlier analysis of Milton's bogey should tell us, however, that for Mary Shelley the part of Eve is all the parts." (p. 320) No one figure has much in common with Eve, but some of them share something with her and so become a kind of pastiche? On the other hand, the clear presence of many Miltonic elements makes such a thesis tenable if not persuasive. When Heathcliff must become part of a female principle, however, common sense rebels against such thesis-mongering. Yes, Heathcliff is alienated and deprived of a heritage, but that analogy to women's position will not suffice to make him "female" or "an alternate version of masculinity" when his aggressive male sexuality and his legal revenge (open only to a man) constitute so much of his presence.

As the argument becomes less compelling, the language and style become less lucid and elegant. The final section, on Emily Dickinson, contains jargon in full Bloom, and some habits of analysis degenerate into rather annoying stylistic tics. The discovery of disguised meanings in individual words makes up an important part of the introductory argument. To note there that "premises" means both "argumentative assumptions" and "buildings or dwelling places" and that premises in both senses have enclosed women writers seems valuable. To observe later that "Hareton" becomes "Heir/ton (Heir-/town?)" does not.

The chapters on George Eliot have neither the last section's jar

gon nor the preceding section's tendency to overread; they do demonstrate, however, a serious critical failing. First, the treatment of Eliot is anomalous in the context of the rest of the book. Gilbert and Gubar fiercely defend the sanity and intelligence of Emily Dickinson's refusal to participate in an insane culture; they say nothing at all about Charlotte Brontë's decision to marry and in effect give up writing. George Eliot, however, is condescendingly criticized for "her inability to stand alone." Furthermore, she is taken to task for faults ranging from preferring male friends to refusing to read reviews of her work. This portrait of Eliot's dependence initially appeared in Gordon Haight's biography, and it almost caricatures a woman who could certainly have found many more conventional and less productive ways to avoid standing alone.

Why this animus? George Eliot refuses, we learn, to write her own story. Now Gilbert and Gubar mean this objection not only in the literal sense that Eliot did not write autobiographically but in the figurative sense that she tends to value renunciation more highly than self-assertion and thus does not present successful, aggressive women like herself. Why, however, must Eliot write her own story? Committed to a realist aesthetic, and in her early work to ordinary characters, she can neither present her own experience as typical nor construct superwomen. Gilbert and Gubar claim that Eliot not only accepts self-renunciation but applauds it and denies the moral validity of her heroines' anger by making them afraid of their own hatred. This representation is essentially correct, but it gives a false impression. Eliot prescribes renunciation for male characters as well, and they too are afraid of their own anger, witness Lydgate struggling to remain in love with Rosamond because he cannot bear a loveless marriage. *Daniel Deronda*, which mitigates Eliot's earlier view of renunciation, receives barely a mention. In short, Eliot did not write the stories which Gilbert and Gubar wish she had, and their feminist examination of her works proceeds from an ideological bias against what she did write.

Fortunately, the book returns to issues and writers better suited to its authors' tastes in "The Aesthetics of Renunciation." Like the introductory section on metaphors of literary creation, this chapter deals superbly with a trend, here the tendency of nineteenth-century women authors to write prose rather than lyric poetry. The impossibility of earning a living by writing such poetry (as compared with the relative

ease, in England, of doing so by writing popular novels), the inaccessibility of classical forms to those denied a classical education, and above all, the direct self-assertion required by the lyric combined, Gilbert and Gubar suggest, to make lyric poetry the most difficult genre for a woman writer. Such suggestions contribute enormously to our comprehension of both the nineteenth century and women's literary progress. *The Madwoman in the Attic* is an important and — a most underrated value in the scholarly world — an exciting book.

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