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Feminism vs. Literature

Carol Iannone

SCARCELY a single scholarly discipline now stands without its corrective feminist insurgency, and the profession of English literature is no exception. In fact, in literary studies feminism is no longer an insurgency but an ascendancy. In the words of Peter Brooks, director of Yale's Whitney Humanities Center, "Anyone worth his salt in literary criticism today has to become something of a feminist"; the profession itself, Brooks says, "is becoming feminized."

Of course feminist criticism was never exactly the oppressed and embattled literary alternative it once purported to be. It has met with precious little opposition from the "male-dominated" academy, and was in fact appeased and accommodated from its first appearance on the horizon in the late 60's and early 70's, when it began to carve out a sphere of influence in the Modern Language Association. But recent gains have been especially striking. It seems quite telling, for example, that the prominent feminist critic Elaine Showalter has risen from Visiting Minor Professor at the University of Delaware to the William and Annie Paton Foundation Professor of Ancient and Modern Literatures and the Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities at Princeton, and that another prominent feminist critic, Sandra M. Gilbert, has followed Elaine Showalter to Princeton. Still another symptom of the "feminization" of which Peter Brooks speaks is the series of books

that Professor Gilbert has co-authored and co-edited with Susan Gubar of Indiana University.

Professors Gilbert and Gubar's first joint work, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (1979), was one of a number of book-length efforts to appear in the 70's aimed at analyzing literature by women as a separate category. *Madwoman* begins with a question that might seem ironic coming from a feminist perspective, namely, how did 19th-century female authors meet the monumental challenge of being both women and writers? According to Professors Gilbert and Gubar, literary "assertion" is necessarily incompatible with the habits of feminine submission demanded by "patriarchy." Therefore, the "difficult task" faced by British and American women writers in the 19th century was to achieve "true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards."

Jane Austen, for example, masks beneath the serene surface of her art "a subversive critique of the forms of self-expression available to her both as an artist and as a woman." How so? By, among other things, identifying herself in her novels "not only with her model heroines but also with less obvious, nastier, more resilient and energetic female characters who enact her rebellious dissent from her culture." Or again, George Eliot, contrary to the usual conception of her as an author of compassionate detachment, actually commits "violent retributions" against her own characters, and specifically those male charac-

ters who "symbolize patriarchal power." Similarly, in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Catherine's "masochistic self-starvation" during her pregnancy is not the exacerbated willfulness most readers have taken it for but a protest against female fate, an "obvious response to the pregnant woman's fear of being monstrously inhabited as well as to her own horror of being enslaved to the species and reduced to a tool of the life process."

In general, the female tradition Professors Gilbert and Gubar document is one of restriction, resistance, and rage—"images of enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles functioned as asocial surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort, . . . along with obsessive depictions of diseases like anorexia, agoraphobia, and claustrophobia." Any effort a woman writer might make to balance, or normalize, or enlarge, or understand, or circumscribe these elements is seen as a capitulation to the necessities of working in a "patriarchal" form. By discussing minor writers and works with virtually the same aesthetic deference given to major works; by ranging wildly among authors of very different sorts; and by pouncing on every conceivable reference to gender (noting, for example, that in *Wuthering Heights* Catherine is attacked by a "male bulldog"), Professors Gilbert and Gubar manage to manufacture a case for a continuous and interactive tradition of rebelliousness among British and American women writers of the 19th century, even into the 20th.

WHAT distinguished *The Madwoman in the Attic* from previous works on the subject of literature by women was its authors' willingness to suspend normal literary standards entirely and employ a so-called "female" or "feminist" aesthetic instead. Before *Madwoman*, many would-be feminist critics had

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found themselves bound by the traditional criteria that they either still respected or did not yet know how to be rid of. Ellen Moers, for example, in *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (1977), managed both to avoid any overt challenge to the literary canon and to keep separate the claims of political ideology from those of aesthetic representation. Similarly, Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977), although purporting to reconstruct a lost female tradition, bent no aesthetic standards, implicitly or explicitly, in order to accommodate any of the minor artists she claimed had been ignored, and also cautioned against any "theory of a female sensibility" that would suggest "a deep, basic, and inevitable difference between male and female ways of perceiving the world." (By 1981, however, Professor Showalter would arrive at the crucial distinction between "patriarchal values" and the "female aesthetic," or, as she would then put it, between the "androcentric critical tradition" and the need for "gynocritics.")

Then there was Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), a study of the 19th-century American writers whom Nathaniel Hawthorne called a "damned mob of scribbling women." Here was a female tradition indeed, but, according to Professor Douglas, a meretricious one. Far from being exemplary repositories of a uniquely female consciousness, the works of these scribblers were seen by Professor Douglas as mere artifacts of popular culture and as the products of a historical cohesion between Protestant ministers and female sentimentalists. (In the preface to the recently published second edition of her book, Professor Douglas too recants in part; although she stands by her low critical assessment of the books in question, she adds that "the reliability and validity of the 'canon' of almost exclusively male-authored . . . works is now rightfully and forcibly questioned by feminist scholars.")

Two more products of the 70's were Patricia Meyer Spacks's *The*

Female Imagination (1975) and Elizabeth Hardwick's *Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature* (1975). The first was feminist only in its subject matter; in her literary judgments, however, Professor Spacks admiringly observes, for example, that the great 19th-century women writers were less interested in "social injustice" than in the "primacy of personal moral effort." The second, although praised by Susan Sontag as "the most remarkable of recent contributions to the feminist imagination of history," was roundly set upon by feminists for, among many other things, exalting female masochism.

In sum, if the feminist literary effort had stopped where these books stopped, it would soon have blended into the mainstream, perhaps having succeeded in focusing a bit more attention on women writers and female characters. To go beyond this point, it was necessary to go beyond traditional literary standards themselves. In *Women's Fiction: A Guide to Novels By and About Women in America, 1820-1870* (1978), Nina Baym appeared to be on the cusp of the requisite revelation:

A reexamination of this fiction may well show it to lack the aesthetic, intellectual, and moral complexity and artistry that we demand of great literature. I confess frankly that although I found much to interest me in these books, I have not unearthed a forgotten Jane Austen or George Eliot, or hit upon even one novel that I would propose to set alongside *The Scarlet Letter*. Yet I cannot avoid the belief that "purely" literary criteria, as they have been employed to identify the best American works, have inevitably had a bias in favor of things male.

And Annette Kolodny put the issue even more bluntly in 1980 when she asserted that "we have had enough pronouncements of aesthetic valuation for a time."

This, then, is where *The Madwoman in the Attic* came in. The friendly reviewer in the *New York Times* was quite correct in perceiving in it "the first persuasive case

for the existence of a distinctly female imagination," and it is not for nothing that the book has been termed a "bible" by both feminist and non-feminist writers or that Professors Gilbert and Gubar have been called "perhaps the most influential of feminist critics." By freeing themselves completely from normal aesthetic criteria and elevating the "feminist aesthetic" instead, they pointed the way to the future.

IT WOULD BE INCORRECT to suggest, as Patricia Meyer Spacks was quoted as saying in a recent article in the *New York Times Magazine* ("Literary Feminism Comes of Age," by Elizabeth Kolbert, December 6, 1987), that feminist criticism swept all before it on account of its intellectual strengths. Indeed, at the time of its publication, not many reviewers of *The Madwoman in the Attic* were convinced by its arguments. Thus, an unsympathetic Rosemary Ashton writing in the (London) *Times Literary Supplement* wondered whether the terrible "dilemma" that is the foundation of the Gilbert-Gubar thesis arises only within the paradigm of female oppression, pointing out that many elements in the allegedly "female" tradition could be located in male writers as well. (Dickens, for example, uses images of confinement.)

Even sympathetic critics were less than fully persuaded. An otherwise enthusiastic Frances Talianferro conceded in *Harper's* that "For all their scholarly brilliance . . . Gilbert and Gubar are most powerful when they speak to the heart and not to the brain," while the appreciative *New York Times* reviewer quoted above felt *Madwoman* "too ambitious in its reach to leave one feeling that everything it touches upon has been fully grasped." Likewise, Rosemary Dinnage in the *New York Review of Books* complained that "Gilbert and Gubar belittle their women subjects by ignoring their generosity and detachment, by representing them—as they particularly wished not to be—as women before writers, and by imposing a 20th-

century gloss on 19th-century imaginations."

Among feminist academic reviewers, Annette Kolodny, writing in *American Literature*, found *Madwoman's* readings "breath-taking," but took issue with the easy way its authors yoked American and British writers in the same tradition, ignoring the possibility that American authors, generally, suffered before the dominance of the enormously rich European literary inheritance" the same kind of "inferiorization" which supposedly plagued women writers facing the male past. In *Victorian Studies*, Nina Auerbach found that Professors Gilbert and Gubar "argue less by amassing evidence than by weaving a pastiche whereby one woman artist speaks for all in a timeless world." She objected to this "choric method," which created a kind of undifferentiated "corporate womanhood," and complained too that *Madwoman* posits a patriarchal oppressor who is more gargantuan than any I have met, in the 19th century or our own." (For a committed feminist, this was really saying something.)

In the case of each of these reviewers, it is true, what the mind could not credit the emotions nevertheless found grounds to applaud. (A "jubilant achievement," is how Nina Auerbach described *Madwoman*.) Still, the kinds of objections they raised—against the book's one-sidedness, its tendency to exaggerate, its simplistic identification of authors by virtue of gender, its omission of other relevant critical and historical contexts, its selective emphasis on rebelliousness—all appealed to traditional intellectual and literary standards of judgment. For these reviewers, no "female aesthetic" had, as yet, obviated the necessity for applying such traditional standards, even if a sense of feminist solidarity permitted a certain blanket endorsement despite them.

PROFESSORS Gilbert and Gubar's second major effort, the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (1985), collected writings from the Middle Ages through the 20th cen-

tury. Unlike *Madwoman*, this anthology did arouse an open controversy over its methods when a living, breathing "woman writer" actually laid critical eyes upon it. Writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, the novelist Gail Godwin asserted that "the values of feminist interpretation are elevated to a *summa* at the expense of literary art and individual talents." Women writers, especially younger ones, whose works "do not always deal with female experience or lend themselves to feminist explication," had been virtually ignored. As Miss Godwin noted, Jane Austen was represented solely by a teen-age spoof intended to illustrate her resistance to "the sentimental education accorded Regency ladies," and George Eliot by an extremely minor work, "The Lifted Veil," which she herself had asked her publisher to omit from an anthology of her tales but which supposedly "extends the tradition of female Gothic." *Jane Eyre*, *The Awakening*, and *The Bluest Eye* were included because each "focuses on problems of gender."

Miss Godwin's review provoked a flurry of angry responses. There was, predictably, no substantive disagreement with her contentions. Instead, in a letter signed by five prominent feminist critics, she was accused of "political bias" and lectured on the "illusion" of universality. "There is no universal literature," these respondents insisted, and "all of it arises from beliefs that are no less ideological for being unexamined or widely accepted as 'normal.'" Another feminist decried Miss Godwin's denial of a female literary tradition "in the face of massive and growing evidence to the contrary"; for still another, Miss Godwin's views could only be ascribed to "the resistance of a woman who is herself at odds concerning her relationship to a tradition of other women."

Of course, what specific "ideological" beliefs Miss Godwin had illegitimately propounded were not spelled out by her critics, nor was any of the "massive and growing evidence" of the female tradition actually adduced. But this did not matter. By 1985, the indignant

insistence on a chimerical female tradition had obviously become a useful tool for wielding threats and subduing opponents. For Miss Godwin's respondents, what mattered was that Professors Gilbert and Gubar had established a way in which a feminist criticism could flourish through the dismissal of ordinary standards of judgment as themselves patriarchal and ideological. In other words, they were no longer operating at all in the world of literature and literary standards, but entirely in the world of politics.

PROFESSORS Gilbert and Gubar's latest collaboration, a projected three-volume study entitled *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, of which the first volume, *The War of the Words*, has just been published,* goes beyond even the territory gained in the previous ideological battles. Now they are out to prove that all of modernism was shaped by the entry of women into public and literary life, and has been characterized by a century-old battle for primacy between male and female writers. Once again, in the pursuit of their thesis they range wildly from writer to writer, and from period to period, and once again they erase all relevant distinctions—among serious literature, popular literature, sub-literature, songs, jingles, tracts, manifestoes, memoirs, journals, diaries, and letters.

The War of the Words is a mess, literally, the result of prolonged indulgence in sloppy critical methods to score feminist points. First there is the authors' reductive tendency to jump on any reference to gender or sexuality in any context as evidence of sexual literary warfare. (As a reviewer in the *Christian Science Monitor* wondered warily: is Emerson's call for "spermatism, prophesying, man-making words" necessarily "an assertion of gender superiority rather than a plea for creativity, passion, and boldness in literature"?) But this tendency to magnify and politicize

* Yale University Press, 320 pp., \$22.95.

any sexual reference is itself only one aspect of a larger and no less disastrous critical technique.

HAVING dismissed literary standards as patriarchal, the authors are left with a crude, quasi-biological sexual polarity that is simply inadequate for tracing even the simplest cultural distinctions. They argue, for example, that two famous lines from T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"—"In the room the women come and go/Talking of Michelangelo"—show that Prufrock (like Eliot) is threatened by modern women who can now "freely come and go" and are capable not only of "talking of" but also gazing at and metaphorically possessing the paintings and sculptures of Michelangelo." It is, however, precisely the meaning of these lines that the women in question, and the culture they are meant to represent, do *not* possess Michelangelo in any meaningful sense, but have trivialized him into a kind of tea chatter.

Thus it is with most of what passes for literary criticism in *The War of the Words*, a book in which Gilbert and Sullivan are discussed alongside Eliot and Yeats, Charlotte Mew alongside Edith Wharton, in which an early unpublished poem by Eliot is analyzed with the same attention given to "The Waste Land," and in which the extraordinarily painful and conflicted responses of a young black boy to a naked white woman in Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* are taken as evidence of male ambivalence toward rape.

In *The War of the Words*, feminism has eaten alive any sense of natural affinity between the two sexes. (The second volume of *No Man's Land*, incidentally, is scheduled to be a delineation of the "lesbian literary tradition.") The quite correct analysis Professors Gilbert and Gubar offer of Henry James's *The Bostonians*—"that even in a society where heterosexuality has been undermined, the norms of traditional marriage will inevitably reassert themselves"—turns into an indictment of James for unregenerate masculinism. The poet W.D. Snodgrass is taken to

task for implying in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Heart's Needle* that a woman might depend upon a man for orgasmic pleasure. Women writers are scaled on how graphically they depict the sex wars, and how successfully they can imagine womanhood victorious.

The supposed antagonism between men and women extends to male and female writers as well—any female writer, regardless of quality. Thus Hawthorne is scored for complaining about the "damned mob of scribbling women," even though, as Ann Douglas has shown, he had every right to his objection. Professors Gilbert and Gubar do, momentarily, concede the admiration felt by many male authors for serious female writers, but they consider any response short of wide-eyed enthusiasm to be evidence of fear, or hatred, or both. Although Henry James "supported and complimented Edith Wharton," he also "mythologizes" her "as the whirling one . . . the Angel of Destruction." And Ernest Hemingway "admits about his beloved Marianne Moore that, at their first encounter, 'he not a little feared her not only because of her keen wit but for her skill as a writer of poems.'"

What about those women writers who have themselves expressed reservations about other women writers, like George Eliot in her devastatingly witty essay, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," or Dorothy Parker, who disdained "the Misses Baldwin, Ferber, Norris," or Willa Cather, who remarked that "when I see the announcement of a new book by a woman, I—well, I take one by a man instead"? In Professors Gilbert and Gubar's presentation, all these are construed not as praiseworthy attempts to separate the tares from the wheat but as manifestations of a "female affiliation complex"—the struggle of the female writer with her "matrilineal" heritage. Thus does feminist criticism, far from encouraging excellence among women writers, commit itself inexorably to mediocrity and worse.

IN "A Room of One's Own," an essay characteristically misread as a

feminist tract, Virginia Woolf asserts that "it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. . . . It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman. And fatal is no figure of speech; for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death." The truly great artist, Woolf observes, like William Shakespeare, like Jane Austen, is one who writes "without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching."

Although Professors Gilbert and Gubar deal at length with Virginia Woolf and "A Room of One's Own," they studiously avoid this section of her essay, and for understandable reasons. Their "feminist aesthetic" of sexual grievance and Virginia Woolf's aesthetic of transcendence cannot coexist, nor is any "dialogue" possible between them, since one must ultimately displace the other.

Thus, in their reading of Jane Austen's *Emma*, Professors Gilbert and Gubar see the steps that the heroine must undergo before she can befriend the less fortunate Jane Fairfax as lessons in a shared "vulnerability as a female." What really happens in the novel, however, is that Emma learns humility, a necessary condition before she can feel an affinity with a person more poorly situated than herself. The one interpretation is political, the other personal and moral. The one unfolds a supposedly liberating insight that actually leads to being trapped in grievance; the other is grounded in a self-perception that leads ultimately to freedom from self and genuine attachment to others.

GIVEN this basic incompatibility, feminist criticism *must* eliminate the reliance on literary standards, lest literary standards eliminate it. There really is a war of the words, then, only it is not between men and women but between feminist critics and those who care about protecting the conditions necessary for creating and appreciating great literature. In their angry response to Gail Godwin, the five critics

resentfully recalled their days as graduate students, when the study of women writers was supposedly a marginal activity. One wonders what *their* students will be saying

twenty years hence. Will they even be able to recognize a true work of art when they see one, or will the "feminization" of criticism have so undermined aesthetic response that

an appreciation of literary quality will be out of their reach? That depends on who wins the current war of the words; so far the answer seems depressingly clear.

Remembering Sam Spiegel

Daniel Fuchs

SAM SPIEGEL died just a few years ago and a biography of him, already out, deals with the big parties he gave in the 40's at his house in Beverly Hills. Spiegel didn't own the house; I think it wasn't even rented to him but loaned. The streets up there are named after trees—Maple, Elm, Palm—and Spiegel's house was on the 600 block, not one of the better blocks, on the south corner of his tree-named street and Carmelita Avenue. It wasn't really much of a house, no mansion, a modest two- or three-bedroom house. There was a gloomy, empty-looking playroom in the semi-basement, but stemming off the playroom was Spiegel's larder, or pantry, a large-sized cool room stocked with cheeses and all kinds of delicatessen specialties, salamis hanging on strings from the ceiling.

I was at the house mostly in the daytime. John Huston, who died last year, and I were writing a script for Spiegel, who was then a producer for Twentieth Century-Fox. This was the spring right after Pearl Harbor; Huston was in uniform, in the army, but had worked out a dispensation in an irregular

military arrangement there is no point in going into. We would meet at Spiegel's house and after a late breakfast or lunch there, John and I would play gin rummy at the table in the dining room. Gin was the game everyone played in those days. Spiegel would lecture us sternly, shaming us for being indoors all day when, he said, we should be out in the sun enjoying the bountiful spring weather, and then, after scolding us, would draw up a chair and kibitz, always at Huston's side of the table, giving him tips and telling him which cards to play. I resented this and protested, no match for the two of them, and in the end lost heavily—well, \$700. (Huston never saw a cent of it; he wasn't a good gin player, either. "Make the check out to Toler," he said when we settled up, only partly reducing his gambling debt to the other fellow.)

We were pretty young in those days, Spiegel strangely too, only six and eight years ahead of us, but he was old in manner and looks, European, broad-chested and overweight, with his stately, ponderous tread and bearing. He took a paternalistic stance with us, and Huston delighted in tormenting him. One day, late in the afternoon, after Spiegel had spent hours in vain trying to track us down, Huston

got a girl to say she was calling from the county morgue, that there had been a terrible accident, a car smash, two young men, and would Spiegel help identify them, that a car from the coroner's office was on its way to pick him up. Huston and I drove to Carmelita Avenue and parked cater-cornered across from Spiegel's house. He was already out on the sidewalk. He had in those days an elderly, patient, resigned German police dog he was devoted to, and the two of them were walking together up and down the street in front of the house, Spiegel rubbing his face with his hand and suffering until he saw us in the parked car. He broke down completely, out of relief that we were alive and from the cruelty of what he had been put through. He upbraided Huston right there out in the open on the street, shouting and threatening and actually crying. These people weren't as unfeeling as they have been depicted. They had their vulnerable, human side. The director Jean Negulesco, in his memoir *Things I Did and Things I Think I Did*, tells the story of Samuei Goldwyn, another hard-hitter, who couldn't sleep one night, vexed by a casting problem that obstinately refused to be solved. Goldwyn tossed and turned, suddenly got the notion that Spie-

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