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Review of *Shelley's Goddess: Maternity, Language and Subjectivity* by Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi

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campaign of extirpation and enclosure of Native American populations, making the Far West safe for tourism.

Greenfield early on establishes a central paradigm, the image of a “discoverer” standing on a height and surveying the pristine beauty of a “new” land, empty of civilized people—often of any people. This is a valid icon, one that may be traced back to Filson’s Rousseauistic account of Daniel Boone’s “discovery” of Kentucky, and it has its epiphanic equivalent in “Ktaadn.” But it is an image that gives particular point to the traditional image of Custer at the Little Big Horn, standing on a hilltop with sword and pistol in the center of a circle of recumbent white soldiers, while below the vista is filled with hundreds of examples of “the red face of man.” This is my image, not Greenfield’s, but it does help to put the discovery narrative into its larger context, one acutely relevant to his emphasis on the tragic fate of the Indian. As a hilltop prospect it provides a terminus, of sorts, to the impetus of discovery during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, much as Custer’s death provided warrant for the final stage of warfare against the Plains Indians. To my mind Custer, not Thoreau, provides the ultimate example, validating by his death a historical sequence to which Thoreau’s Maine journeys were at best marginal if not tangential. It is a sequence of such clear and definable parts, of such impetus and historical sweep, as to reduce to the dimensions of the dust on Custer’s boots the fashionable notion of “guilt” entertained by academics of a post-Vietnam and antideterministic persuasion. In striving to escape the present moment, Thoreau removed himself from what is now history; and in following his example, so do we.

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BARBARA CHARLESWORTH GELPI, *Shelley’s Goddess: Maternity, Language, Subjectivity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. Pp. xx + 311. \$45 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

When the hero of Ferdinand von Loeben’s 1808 novel *Guido* sees a sample of handwriting in Sanskrit he remarks, “languages have always seemed to me to be lost holy children who cover the whole world in search of their mother” (p. 62). Guido’s observation could stand as a paraphrase of Percy Shelley’s lifelong interest in language, mediated as it was by his equally compelling obsessions with

maternity and subjectivity. And we are fortunate to have these three concerns brought together by Barbara Gelpi's *Shelley's Goddess*. For the first time, we have an exploration of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century ideologies of motherhood, Lacanian and Kristevan narratives of subjectivity, a discussion of the interpersonal theories of Daniel Stern, and a historical overview of the life of Shelley's mother, Elizabeth. This rather cumbersome and disparate theoretical edifice supports three long chapters that closely examine the mother and permutations of her presence in Shelley's major work, *Prometheus Unbound*. While I cannot help but admire the obvious energy and extensive scholarship evidenced in this volume, I am less sanguine about the methods and tone of the author.

The strongest sections of the volume are "Her Destined Sphere" and "Queen of the Field Place Hive," the second and third chapters of Part I, "The Nurse's Soul." In "Her Destined Sphere" we have a succinct overview of the medical, popular, educational, and journalistic sources that buttressed the newly emerging maternal ideology. While valuable, this section is less original than it might be to readers who are already familiar with the same argument developed with a great deal more sophistication by Friedrich A. Kittler in *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900* (1985; trans. 1990). "Queen of the Field Place Hive" brings together all of the scanty historical evidence we have about Elizabeth Pilford Shelley. Most interesting here are Gelpi's forays into interpreting Shelley's relationship with his mother, father, and sisters. Although one always senses the neurotic eros in Shelley's poetry, it is helpful to have the letters and childhood incidents brought together to trace clearly his "own identification with the feminine maternal" (p. 98).

While I found Gelpi strongest in her ability to read as a biographical critic, I found her less convincing when she actually read *Prometheus Unbound*. Or rather, I found her too timid or hesitant about drawing out the obvious psychoanalytical implications of the introductory material she had spent three chapters developing. According to her argument, Shelley was engaged in this work in a massive imaginative struggle to destroy his own father and both become and marry his mother and sisters. When she confronts the power of his neurosis directly (p. 226) she is more convincing than when she brings in other critics and commentators, which she does to an extent that detracts from the full implications of her own position.

As I said, there is much of value and a sharp intellect at work in this volume, but I found certain areas of concern, and I delineate those here. There is no denying the fact that Gelpi consciously presents herself as a politically correct late-twentieth-century liberal feminist

trying to recuperate an early-nineteenth-century, nonfeminist white male poet. Her continual special pleadings for Shelley, dressed up as Lacanian or Kristevan, smack at times as “apologizing” for Shelley. I found such a critical stance intrusive and awkward. Shelley does not need to be repackaged to make him palatable for us; nor do we need to be told that *Prometheus Unbound* “takes white masculinity not only as the human norm but as the only fully operative subjectivity” (p. 230). We need to understand Shelley’s vision and accept it within the historical and cultural constraints that we all know existed then.

I also had reservations about the scope of this volume. While the introductory sections are psychologically and historically expansive, they are used to support a close reading of one figure in one poem. The author tells us that she is wary of generalization (p. viii), but surely the “infancy narratives” and the maternal ideologies she has charted were applicable to more writers than one. As Kittler’s book so powerfully reveals, the equation “Woman = Nature = Mother” provided the theoretical underpinnings of European Romanticism as well as the entire “discourse network” it spawned throughout the nineteenth century.

As I mentioned earlier, this book is very heavy on the use of other critics and commentators on *Prometheus Unbound*. For instance, Marcuse is used as a commentator on the poem although there is no evidence that he ever read it (p. 162). Even more worrisome is the use of secondary sources to explain primary sources readily available in English. For instance, we do not get Gelpi grappling with Lacan; we get Lacan via Kaja Silverman, or we get Kristeva via Andrea Nye. The very heavy use of secondary and tertiary sources added to my sense of unease in reading the theoretical sections of this book. Too many mirrors are mirroring.

We are also told, in the preface, that the author has worked on this volume for a number of years and shifted her interests during the course of her work. One of the traces of that long labor is what I might call the eccentric reading. I found myself particularly puzzled by the lengthy discussion of the Sumerian figure of Dumuzi, beloved of the goddess Inanna, as a precursor of Adonis, who was then a precursor for Prometheus. This particular Sumerian shepherd, as Gelpi admits, was not discovered by scholars until thirty years after Shelley’s death (p. 235), so why use him in a historically causal chain leading to Shelley’s creation of Prometheus? Even more eccentric to my tastes was the graph showing where visual, aural, and tactile synonyms occurred within the text of *Prometheus Unbound* (p. 232). Done by a “computer program to chart patterns of imagery,” it is the sort of postindustrial artifact that I could not help feeling that Shelley himself would disdain.

Aside from these reservations, I have recommended *Shelley's Goddess* to students and colleagues alike. While I might quibble with the author about her methodology and tone, I applaud her efforts to examine closely the psychological milieux in which Shelley lived and wrote his most important work.

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SUSAN FRAIMAN, *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. Pp. xvii + 189. \$35.

LYN PYKETT, *The "Improper" Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing*. New York: Routledge, 1992. Pp. xii + 235. \$49.95.

Susan Fraiman's *Unbecoming Women* attempts to answer the familiar question "Is there a female *Bildungsroman*?" by studying patterns of deformation and discontinuity in nineteenth-century novels about women. Her chief response to this question is that women's novels are consistently set in relation to conventional narrative paradigms of development as well as to a network of often contradictory alternatives to them, which marks these novels with a variety of contradictions and discontinuities. Fraiman thus demonstrates the loss of critical distance involved in any simple equation drawn between gender and genre. She also raises important questions about the relationship between women's novels of development and the *Bildungsroman* tradition as it has been constructed by critical commentary.

In purely theoretical terms, Fraiman tries to avoid monolithic resolutions of the "female *Bildungsroman*" question by uncoupling these two terms. Yet Fraiman's theoretical framework is not really the strong point of her work, for in the course of theorizing the gender/genre conundrum she has a tendency precisely to reify this relationship. She assumes, for example, that there is a self-evident, unified *Bildung* plot that women novelists have systematically resisted. This forces her to formalize a familiar set of gendered oppositions in order to describe the developmental fictions of women writers: male and female novels of development are slotted into predictable polarities of homogeneity/heterogeneity, linearity/discontinuity, or coherence/contradiction. While there may be some conceptual value to this pattern of oppositions, and while Fraiman does try to qualify it, it is odd to