

11-1-2013

Review of Gilbert & Gubar's *'The Madwoman in the Attic' After Thirty Years*, edited by Annette R. Federico

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Gilbert & Gubar's 'The Madwoman in The Attic' After Thirty Years. Edited by Annette R. Federico. (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2009, 272 pages, \$42.50). ISBN 978-0-8262-1869-8.

“Ecstasy,” “excitement,” “energy,” “pleasure,” and “hope” are words that are used repeatedly in the Introduction to this volume, penned by Sandra Gilbert herself. Although the book could be accused of being yet another instance of praising famous women, Federico’s collection is quite admirably balanced in placing *Madwoman* in its full historical, social, cultural, and critical contexts so that we hear both the praise that has been heaped on the book (rather effusively) as well as the criticism and cavils (in a somewhat more muted tone). A compilation of 13 articles that interrogate Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s pioneering work of feminist literary criticism, this disparate collection, written by established scholars as well as a graduate student, examines the heritage and continuing impact that *Madwoman* has had on the study of literature—from Milton studies to ecofeminism—since its publication in 1979. As a summary of all of these articles is not possible in the space allocated here, I will say initially that the articles that are most relevant to students of gothic are the ones by Carol Margaret Davison (“Ghosts in the Attic: Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* and the Female Gothic”), Katey Castellano (“Feminism to Ecofeminism: The Legacy of Gilbert and Gubar’s Readings of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*”), Hila Shachar (“The Legacy of Hell: *Wuthering Heights* on Film and Gilbert and Gubar’s Feminist Poetics”), and Madeleine Wood (“Enclosing Fantasies: *Jane Eyre*”). Two additional articles on *Jane Eyre* address Gayatri Spivak’s well-known denunciation of the imperialistic and racist subtext of Brontë’s work. The first article examines the novel in relation to the autobiography *Saguna* (1887) by Krupabai Sathianadham; the second

places *Jane Eyre* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* alongside each other in interesting ways. Other articles in the collection focus on works by Louisa May Alcott, the Sensational Canon, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Emily Dickinson.

Most relevant for gothicists, however, is Davison's piece, which should be placed closer to the beginning of this volume. She very rightly criticizes *Madwoman* for ironically exhibiting an "anxiety of influence" toward the seminal and very influential works of Ann Radcliffe and "the concept of the *female Gothic*" itself (204-05). In ignoring the tradition of the female gothic in a work that privileges *Jane Eyre*, Gilbert and Gubar perpetuate male biases against Radcliffe and her followers and vilify and marginalize the female gothic as a "particularly feminized form" of fiction (205). As Davison asserts, "their madwoman (and Charlotte Brontë's) is Radcliffe's long-lost daughter" (204). Reading the bildungsroman as gothic's dark mirror, Davison very usefully traces the evolution of the concept of the female gothic from Moers to Clery, and concludes that Gilbert and Gubar were compelled to ignore the tradition because of the contentious and ambiguous critical status of the gothic as a subject of serious literary study in the late 1970s (211).

Most interesting to me was Madeleine Wood's article on fantasies and their influence on the plot of *Jane Eyre*. Unashamedly using Freud's trauma theory and his notion of the repetition compulsion, Wood traces Jane's ambivalence toward paternal figures and the ideal of paternal love, concluding that Gilbert and Gubar fail "to note the ways in which desires, identifications, and fears become attached to the male figures" so that Jane ultimately "perpetuates her own enclosure" (108-09). Also very useful for gothicists was Hila Shachar's article on three filmic adaptations of *Wuthering Heights*: Jacques Rivette's *Hurlevent* (1985), Peter Kosminsky's *Wuthering Heights* (1992), and the MTV version (2003). Those of us who use film to

supplement our teaching will find these discussions very helpful in setting the novel into its visual context.

As for the introductory articles, the three pieces, by Federico, Susan Fraiman, and Marlene Tromp, set *Madwoman* in its critical context by surveying its reception history, as well as the impact it has had on how literature by and about women has been taught in the academy for the past 30 years. Federico's claim is that the book "transformed our approach to women's writing, feminist critique, and the politics of literary canonization" (2), and the articles that follow her support these assertions. Most impressive to me was the survey designed by Tromp and sent to 400 English professors on the impact of *Madwoman* on their teaching. Although the return rate was not particularly high, the quotations from responses she received are a telling testimony to the legacy of the book's importance in the classroom. All three of these articles also use the personal voice, as does so much of the feminist criticism that was inspired by Gilbert and Gubar and their followers. To follow suit, let me confess that as someone who began to write and teach during this period and watched the faddish and politically correct permutations of the field come and go, I have to say that I recognized, somewhat uneasily, how much of my own work has been influenced by the methods and interests that Gilbert and Gubar taught us to have: the emphasis on tropes and metaphors (a residual heritage of being trained by our professors, new critics, all of them male, in thrall themselves to the likes of Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, et al.); and a sensitivity to examining "madness and monstrosity, domesticity and escape, starvation and burial" (3), in other words, a tendency to project onto the literature our own professional experiences as students and professors in an academy that was less than nurturing to us. This tendency has been celebrated and perhaps even vindicated in the famous feminist credo: the personal is the political, but in much of the work inspired by this justification

one has to recognize a certain self-invested stance: the need to focus on literature that presented women as victims of a patriarchy that they could only fictitiously attempt to control with that unwieldy pen/penis.

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