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## Vision and Revision: Nineteenth-Century Women

Harriet Ritvo

**E**VEN CHILDREN of the 'sixties can remember when bookstores had no shelves labeled "Women's Studies." History and literary criticism were ostensibly sex-blind until just over a decade ago; topics like "the English novel" and "the city in America" seemed equally to include men and women. But recognizing their need to redefine their contemporary role, members of a new generation of feminists soon realized that the past too had to be reclaimed. Incorporated in standard male versions of history, women's experience had been systematically distorted or suppressed.

Perhaps the most striking result of the feminist reinterpretation of the past now underway is the number of new topics it automatically releases. (The same, of course, is true of any field of study that defines as significant the activities of people previously considered unimportant.) Historians, for example, have been led away from public events—the wars and political events in which nineteenth-century women could play little part—to domestic concerns. Birth control, child-rearing, and intra-familial power struggles affect men and women alike; they are new subjects because they do not involve men exclusively or primarily. Similarly, the feminist readings of the Anglo-American literary tradition have not excluded men; they have simply made a place for women on their own terms.

At the same time, however, that it introduces new subjects, a feminist approach—or, of course, any political approach—can restrict our understanding of them. (That all historical points of view are, at one level or another, political, and that the interpretation of the past offers large and varied opportunities for inaccuracy, should go without saying.) Thus a commitment to feminist ideology can encourage the historian or critic to mine the past for proof of what he or she knows must have happened, and to ignore evidence or possible interpretations that undermine cherished preconceptions.

In *The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism*, Barbara Berg explores the attempts of certain women in the first half of the nineteenth century to liberate themselves from the constricting ideal of woman as "angel in the house." Berg interprets this ideal as an attempt by middle- and upper-class men, shaken by the weakening of class distinctions caused by urbanization and the beginnings of industrial capitalism, to limit women to trivial activities and supportive roles. Yet, sheltered as they were, genteel women could not help noticing the filth and misery in which many inhabitants of their cities lived; some of them, recognizing a worthy cause and an opportunity to add meaning to their lives, organized to try to ameliorate the effects of urban poverty, especially as they touched other women.

In 1840, as now, the women best equipped to struggle for fulfillment (as

opposed, in some sense, to survival) against the restrictions imposed by a male-dominated society belonged to the middle and upper classes. These are the women who most interest Berg, and her interpretation of their tribulations and achievements reflects a strong unstated comparison with the current female drive to enter the professions and the higher echelons of business. She even, occasionally, refers to her volunteers as "managers."

The constant presence of 1970s ideology works to narrow the scope of *The Remembered Gate*. It excludes both the perspective of the recipients of charity, and the possibility that the satisfactions of the givers were not entirely professional. Indeed, it is possible to see female volunteerism not as rebellion against a male-imposed female role, but as the only appropriate public activity of the domestic angel, one that extended her ministering and caring function into a wider sphere. Berg assumes that all energetic women rejected the "angel" image in some way; she fails to account for its apparent acceptance by many others, some of whom advanced the quasi-feminist argument that it at least reserved one sphere for female activity. And she gives the misleading impression that the mistress of a substantial nineteenth-century household had domestic duties as undemanding as those of the mistress of a modern suburban house.

The problem of twentieth-century bias is not confined to the social historian. Nina Auerbach's *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction* exemplifies the difficulty of approaching the literature of the past through distinctively contemporary feminist concerns. She illustrates her theme most effectively in an imaginative introduction

### BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY

*The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism: The Woman and the City, 1800-1860*, by Barbara Berg. Oxford University Press, 1978, \$14.95 (cloth), \$4.95 (paper).

*Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction*, by Nina Auerbach. Harvard University Press, 1978, \$11.50 (cloth).

*Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880*, by Julie Roy Jeffrey. Hill and Wang, 1979, \$11.95 (cloth), \$5.95 (paper).

*The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Yale University Press, 1979, \$25.00 (cloth), \$10.95 (paper).

about all-female groups—the Graiae, the Fates, the Amazons—in classical mythology. But she is less successful in imposing her structure on the insistent and often bulky prose of a rather miscellaneous group of nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels, a list which begins with *Pride and Prejudice* and *Little Women* and ends with *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Although the individual readings are interesting, the book lacks unity. Most of the novelists are not really writing about the subject Auerbach identifies, but about a larger subject—the relations between men and women. Oddly, the novels that come closest to dealing with female communities are by men: Henry James's *The Bostonians* and George Gissing's *The Odd Women*.

The most illuminating feminist studies struggle successfully against the temptation to impose modern perspectives on material from the past. At the end of the introduction to *Frontier Women*, Julie Roy Jeffrey says that when she began her research, she had "hoped to find that pioneer women used the frontier as a means of liberating themselves from behavior which I found constricting and sexist," but she discovered instead that women pioneers fondly cherished the angel-in-the-house ideal as they cooked by their covered wagons and built their houses on the

prairie. It would have been impossible to dismiss this astonishing group of women as useless and sheltered, so Jeffrey reformulated her question: how did stereotypical female role models help the women who settled the agricultural, mining, and urban frontiers of the trans-Mississippi West?

The simple answer seems to be that traditional roles provided both a goal and a link with the relatively secure and civilized life that the women had left behind. Most women pioneers followed their husbands west in search of economic opportunity. Beginning with the long overland trek, most women were deprived of female companionship; circumstances demanded that they share their husbands' hard physical labor. In the first years of settlement, especially if they were homesteaders, there was little distinction between home-making and income-producing activities. Forced to assume duties they regarded as masculine, pioneer women clung to the Victorian ideal in order to preserve their sexual identity.

They yearned, too, for a sphere of their own. Although they did men's work, pioneer women seldom usurped their husbands' prerogatives. The diaries and letters examined by Jeffrey clearly show that women accepted and expected male domination of family and communal life, a domination that was more pronounced than in the East. So

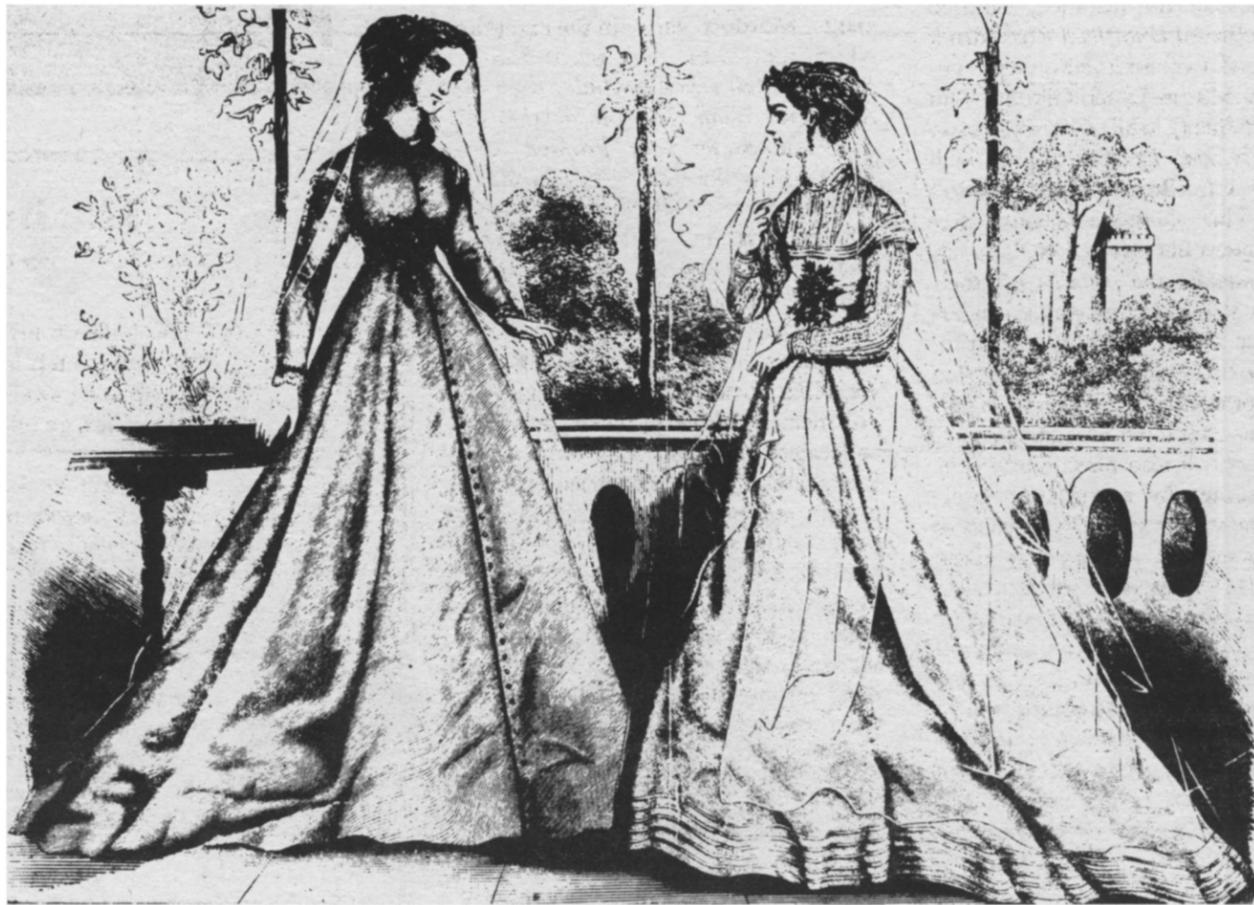


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women longed for the end of the first phase of pioneering because more settled communities would mean more women. A network of women friends to give mutual support at times of stress (such as childbirth) was an early sign of an emerging female community; institutions like churches, schools, and libraries would soon follow.

The angel of the house was conventionally the guardian of morality; she exercised authority through virtue. The absence of Sabbath observance on the trail symbolized the disappearance of female influence; the reestablishment of organized worship and the enforcement of other kinds of social codes in pioneer communities signalled the recrudescence of a female source of power. That, at least, was the pattern in agricultural settlements. In the mining towns, however, which attracted many single men in search of quick fortunes, there were often competing centers of female power. Prostitutes, some very attractive and at least relatively refined, had often established themselves in such towns before wives; successful prostitutes, especially in cities like Denver and San Francisco, might live in a style that parodied the aspirations of more respectable women—to whom, therefore, they represented a serious threat. Rather than combining in sisterhood, western wives organized repeated attacks on vice. Occasionally, the stakes were very high indeed. Jeffrey cites San Francisco's Cora affair, which began when U.S. Marshall William H. Richardson, urged by his wife, tried to make gambler Charles Cora and his mistress (a madam on a large scale) leave a public theater. They refused, but the next day Richardson shot Cora on moral grounds.

Jeffrey shows that western women accepted and endorsed images of themselves that modern feminists find depressing and degrading. That these women were, however, unusually independent and capable suggests that such images must be interpreted carefully, with an understanding of how they were actually used. Jeffrey shows that even the polygamous doctrine of Mormonism could occasionally offer a woman the chance to achieve kinds of self-realization not possible in an ordinary household: in the most successful and harmonious polygamous marriages, the most capable of the wives might administer the whole family's assets. That is to say, Jeffrey, herself a resourceful and flexible interpreter of cultural images, is able to recognize the same qualities in pioneer women.

If cultural stereotypes dictate the patterns of physical existence, they shape the life of the mind more powerfully still. Women writers, according to Susan Gubar and Sandra M. Gilbert in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, have always had to struggle with a double set of inhibiting masculine-derived preconceptions. One is that literary creation is an essentially masculine activity, which women, at best, palely mimic. The other is that if a woman is not an "angel," docile and submissive—and, almost by definition, no substantial woman author fits this category—she must be a monster. In the nineteenth century, female authorship became very common and women authors very diverse. Yet Gubar and Gilbert argue

that beneath their differences, these writers—novelists especially—share a central concern to define themselves as authors. Thus two major themes emerge in work after work: the title image of the madwoman in the attic (which refers specifically to Bertha Mason, the first wife of Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, and generally to the novelists' and poets' own socially unacceptable energies); and a pattern in the plots of enclosure and escape. In a brilliant and often surprising analysis, Gubar and Gilbert uncover the submerged feminist dialogue which molds the works of a wide range of nineteenth-century authors into a coherent female tradition.

The madwoman is at once the double of the lady author and of the author's genteel heroine. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, Elizabeth Bennett is rebellious, for a young lady, but not all that rebellious—her high spirits do not make her less eligible for a splendid marriage. Her prospective aunt-in-law Lady Catherine de Bourgh, a rich, eccentric, and self-willed widow, allows herself much more latitude in behavior. Economically independent and socially secure, she enthusiastically manipulates those around her, making and unmaking the plots of their lives.

The "madwoman" appears more dramatically in *Frankenstein*. Gubar and Gilbert read Mary Shelley's novel as an analogy to *Paradise Lost* (Milton being, in their view, the male author most oppressive to female authors), radically retold from feminine point of view. Victor Frankenstein, the monster's creator, though he resembles Adam and Satan, is most like Eve: his most important act, after all, is to give birth to the monster. And the monster, some of whose attributes are obviously Satanic, is also at bottom an emanation of Eve. Excluded, as she is, from intercourse with rational beings, the monster blames his grotesque body, which is

described in terms that evoke a long-standing masculine tradition of horror at female flesh. (The pure angel woman has always seemed somehow disembodied, free from the taint of physicality; Lemuel Gulliver's horrified description of a Brobdignagian breast epitomizes the reaction to real women on the part of men attracted by angels.) Along with much else, women absorbed this opinion of their bodies, and in *Frankenstein*, as in the creations of many women, it merges with the idea that public female intellectual activity is unnatural and unpleasant.

Besides their stimulating interpretations of individual works and their well-established connections among a large and varied group of writers, Gubar and Gilbert offer an organic method of feminist criticism. Their political convictions are expressed in what they choose to talk about; they never seem to force modern issues on a bewildered nineteenth-century text. And because they identify demonstrably central concerns of the writers they discuss, their proposal of a coherent female counter-tradition in literature—which embraces Jane Austen and Mary Shelley, George Eliot and Emily Dickinson—is persuasive, as is their explanation of how that tradition worked with and against the mainstream, male-defined tradition. Their strict attention and sympathetic response to the texts of nineteenth-century women allow Gilbert and Gubar to serve at once the ends of ideology and criticism; they show that reading with specifically female issues in mind makes it possible to identify the extent to which these writers were concerned with the same problems. They do not claim to have discovered a hermetic tradition, veiled from all but initiated eyes. Indeed, they make a contrary claim: to have uncovered a theme that should have been plain to any reader whose eyes had not previously been clouded by the prevailing view of literature. □



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