

When all theatres make sure that half the plays they put on are by women, the problem of patronage will be on its way out.

So the situation for women playwrights, while briefly improving, could be a matter of fashion. The playwrights currently being performed, if they are not part of a real effort to improve the position of women writers across the board, will merely be token presences of the moment, and perhaps disappear when the novelty of patronizing women's work has worn off. After all, there are already some historical precedents for this. It seems that women playwrights become prominent when there is some kind of fundamental social change which involves morality or sexual ideology: for example, during the Restoration;³ at the turn of the century, coinciding with the movement for female suffrage;⁴ and again in recent years, alongside the new feminism. As the political movements settle and lose their radical or revolutionary momentum, so women recede again from participation in the professional theatre as writers. There is a very real symbiotic relationship between the state of sexual mores, the presence of a feminist movement and the appearance of women playwrights; and the political struggle always comes first. Of course there are continuing flurries and resurgences of energy from women whose feminism or just sheer bloody mindedness makes them choose the theatre. Whether or not there continues to be a vigorous voice from women playwrights will depend to some degree on the state of feminism in a much broader sense. And after that question — of how theatre as an art form, a specific kind of cultural production, relates to politics — there are the vital questions of organization and power.

NOTES

- 1 Catherine Itzin, ed., *British Alternative Theatre Directory of Playwrights, Directors and Designers* (London, John Offord, 1983).
- 2 Conference of Women Theatre Directors and Administrators, *The Status of Women in the British Theatre 1982–1983* (London, WTDA, 1984).
- 3 Fidelis Morgan, ed., *The Female Wits* (London, Virago, 1981).
- 4 Jules Holledge, *Innocent Flowers: Women in Edwardian Theatre* (London, Virago, 1981).

SANDRA M. GILBERT and SUSAN GUBAR
Shakespeare's Sisters

Despite a proliferation of literary ancestresses, however, Elizabeth Barrett Browning commented mournfully in 1845 that 'England has had many learned women . . . and yet where are the poetesses? . . . I look everywhere for grandmothers, and see none.'⁶ In 1862, moreover, Emily Dickinson, articulating in another way the same distinction between women's prose and women's verse, expressed similar bewilderment. Complaining that

They shut me up in Prose —
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet —
Because they liked me "still" —⁷

she implied a recognition that poetry by women was in some sense inappropriate, unladylike, immodest. And in 1928, as if commenting on both Barrett Browning's comment and Dickinson's complaint, Woolf invented a tragic history for her 'Judith Shakespeare' because she so deeply believed that it is 'the poetry that is still denied outlet.'

Why did these three literary women consider poetry by women somehow forbidden or problematical? Woolf herself, after all, traced the careers of Anne Finch and Margaret Cavendish, admired the 'wild poetry' of the Brontës, noted that Barrett Browning's verse-novel *Aurora Leigh* had poetic virtues no prose work could rival, and spoke almost with awe of Christina Rossetti's 'complex song.'⁸ Why, then, did she feel that 'Judith Shakespeare' was 'caught and tangled,' 'denied,' suffocated, self-buried, or not yet born? We can begin to find answers to these questions by briefly reviewing some of the ways in which representative male readers and critics have reacted to poetry by representative women like Barrett Browning and Dickinson.

Introducing *The Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson* in 1959, James Reeves quoted 'a friend' as making a statement which expresses the predominant attitude of many male *literati* toward poetry by women even more succinctly than Woolf's story did: 'A friend who is also a literary critic has suggested, not perhaps quite seriously, that "woman poet" is a contradiction in terms.'⁹ In other words, from what Woolf would call the 'masculinist' point of view, the very nature of lyric poetry is inherently incompatible with the nature or essence of femaleness. Remarks by other 'masculinist' readers and critics elaborate on the point. In the midst of favorably reviewing the work of his friend Louise Bogan, for instance, Theodore Roethke detailed the various 'charges most frequently levelled against poetry by women.' Though his statement begins by pretending objectivity, it soon becomes clear that he himself is making such accusations.

Two of the [most frequent] charges . . . are lack of range — in subject matter, in emotional tone — and lack of a sense of humor. And one could, in individual instances among writers of real talent, add other aesthetic and moral shortcomings: the spinning out; the embroidering of trivial themes; a concern with the mere surfaces of life — that special province of the feminine talent in prose — hiding from the real agonies of the spirit; refusing to face up to what existence is; lyric or religious posturing; running between the boudoir and the altar; stamping a tiny foot against God or lapsing into a sententiousness that implies the author has re-invented integrity; carrying on excessively about Fate, about time; lamenting the lot of the woman; caterwauling; writing the same poem about fifty times, and so on. . . .¹⁰

Even a cursory reading of this passage reveals its inconsistency: women are taxed for both triviality and sententiousness, for both silly superficiality and melodramatic 'carrying on' about profound subjects. More significant, however, is the fact that Roethke attacks female poets for doing just what

male poets do — that is, for writing about God, fate, time, and integrity; for writing obsessively on the same themes or subjects, and so forth. But his language suggests that it is precisely the sex of these literary women that subverts their art. Shaking a Promethean male fist 'against God' is one perfectly reasonable aesthetic strategy, apparently, but stamping a 'tiny' feminine foot is quite another.

Along similar lines, John Crowe Ransom noted without disapproval in a 1956 essay about Emily Dickinson that 'it is common belief among readers (among men readers at least) that the woman poet as a type . . . makes flights into nature rather too easily and upon errands which do not have metaphysical importance enough to justify so radical a strategy.'¹¹ Elsewhere in the same essay, describing Dickinson as 'a little home-keeping person' he speculated that 'hardly . . . more' than 'one out of seventeen' of her 1,775 poems are destined to become 'public property,' and observed that her life 'was a humdrum affair of little distinction,' although 'in her Protestant community the gentle spinsters had their assured and useful place in the family circle, they had what was virtually a vocation.'¹² (But how, he seemed to wonder, could someone with so humdrum a social destiny have written great poetry?) Equally concerned with the problematical relationship between Dickinson's poetry and her femaleness — with, that is, what seemed to be an irreconcilable conflict between her 'gentle' spinsterhood and her fierce art — R. P. Blackmur decided in 1937 that 'she was neither a professional poet nor an amateur; she was a private poet who wrote indefatigably, as some women cook or knit. Her gift for words and the cultural predicament of her time drove her to poetry instead of antimacassars.'¹³

Even in 1971, male readers of Dickinson brooded upon this apparent dichotomy of poetry and femininity. John Cody's *After Great Pain* perceptively analyzes the suffering that many of Dickinson's critics and biographers have refused to acknowledge. But his conclusion emphasizes what he too sees as the incompatibility between womanly fulfillment and passionate art.

Had Mrs. Dickinson been warm and affectionate, more intelligent, effective, and admirable, Emily Dickinson early in life would probably have identified with her, become domestic, and adopted the conventional woman's role. She would then have become a church member, been active in community affairs, married, and had children. The creative potentiality would of course still have been there, but would she have discovered it? What motivation to write could have replaced the incentive given by suffering and loneliness? If in spite of her wifely and motherly duties, she had still felt the need to express herself in verse, what would her subject matter have been? Would art have sprung from fulfillment, gratification, and completeness as abundantly as it did from longing, frustration, and deprivation?¹⁴

Interestingly, these questions restate an apparently very different position taken by Ransom fifteen years earlier: 'Most probably [Dickinson's] poems would not have amounted to much if the author had not finally had her own romance, enabling her to fulfill herself like any other woman.' Though Ransom speaks of the presence and 'fulfillment' of 'romance,' while Cody

discusses its tormenting absence, neither imagines that poetry itself could possibly constitute a woman's fulfillment. On the contrary, both assume that the art of a woman poet must in some sense arise from 'romantic' feelings (in the popular, sentimental sense), arise either in response to a real romance or as compensation for a missing one.

In view of this critical obsession with womanly 'fulfillment' — clearly a nineteenth-century notion redefined by twentieth-century thinkers for their own purposes — it is not surprising to find out that when poetry by women *has* been praised it has usually been praised for being 'feminine,' just as it has been blamed for being deficient in 'femininity.' Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for instance, the most frequently analyzed, criticized, praised, and blamed woman poet of her day, was typically admired 'because of her understanding of the depth, tenderness, and humility of the love which is given by women,'¹⁵ and because 'she was a poet in every fibre of her but adorably feminine. . . .'¹⁶ As the 'Shakespeare of her sex,'¹⁷ moreover, she was especially respected for being 'pure and lovely' in her 'private life,' since 'the lives of women of genius have been so frequently sullied by sin . . . that their intellectual gifts are [usually] a curse rather than a blessing.'¹⁸ Significantly, however, when Barrett Browning attempted unromantic, 'unfeminine' political verse in *Poems Before Congress*, her collection of 1860, at least one critic decided that she had been 'seized with a . . . fit of insanity,' explaining that 'to bless and not to curse is a woman's function. . . .'¹⁹

As this capsule review of *ad feminam* criticism suggests, there is evidently something about lyric poetry by women that invites meditations on female fulfillment or, alternatively, on female insanity. In devising a story for 'Judith Shakespeare,' Woolf herself was after all driven to construct a violent plot that ends with her suicidal heroine's burial beneath a bus-stop near the Elephant and Castle. Symbolically speaking, Woolf suggests, modern London, with its technological fumes and its patriarchal roar, grows from the grim crossroads where this mythic woman poet lies dead. And as if to reinforce the morbid ferocity of such imagery, Woolf adds that whenever, reading history or listening to gossip, we hear of witches and magical wise women, 'I think we are on the track of . . . a suppressed poet . . . who dashed her brains out on the moor or mopped and mowed about the highways crazed with the torture that her gift had put her to.' For though 'the original [literary] impulse was to poetry,' and 'the "supreme head of song" was a poetess,' literary women in England and America have almost universally elected to write novels rather than poems for fear of precisely the madness Woolf attributes to Judith Shakespeare. 'Sure the poore woman is a little distracted,' she quotes a contemporary of Margaret Cavendish's as remarking: 'Shee could never be soe ridiculous else as to venture at writeing books and in verse too, if I should not sleep this fortnight I should not come to that.'²⁰ In other words, while the woman novelist, safely shut in prose, may fantasize about freedom with a certain impunity (since she constructs purely fictional alternatives to the difficult reality she inhabits), it appears that the woman poet must in some sense become her own heroine, and that

in enacting the diabolical role of witch or wise woman she literally or figuratively risks a melodramatic death at the crossroads of tradition and genre, society and art.

Without pretending to exhaust a profoundly controversial subject, we should note here that there are a number of generic differences between novel-writing and verse-writing which do support the kinds of distinctions Woolf's story implies. For one thing, as we noted earlier, novel-writing is a useful (because lucrative) occupation, while poetry, except perhaps for the narrative poetry of Byron and Scott, has traditionally had little monetary value. That novel-writing was and is conceivably an occupation to live by has always, however, caused it to seem less intellectually or spiritually valuable than verse-writing, of all possible literary occupations the one to which European culture has traditionally assigned the highest status. Certainly when Walter Pater in 1868 defined the disinterested ecstasy of art for his contemporaries by noting that 'art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake,' he was speaking of what he earlier called 'the poetic passion,' alluding to works like the Odes of Keats rather than the novels of Thackeray or George Eliot. Verse-writing — the product of mysterious 'inspiration,' divine afflatus, bardic ritual — has historically been a holy vocation.²¹ Before the nineteenth century the poet had a nearly priestly role, and 'he' had a wholly priestly role after Romantic thinkers had appropriated the vocabulary of theology for the realm of aesthetics. But if in Western culture women cannot be priests, then how — since poets are priests — can they be poets? The question may sound sophistic, but there is a good deal of evidence that it was and has been consciously or unconsciously asked, by men and women alike, as often as women suffering from 'the poetic passion' have appeared in the antechambers of literature.

As Woolf shows, though, novel-writing is not just a 'lesser' and therefore more suitably female occupation because it is commercial rather than aesthetic, practical rather than priestly. Where novel-writing depends upon reportorial observation, verse-writing has traditionally required aristocratic education. 'Learn . . . for ancient rules a just esteem;/To copy Nature is to copy them,' Alexander Pope admonished aspiring critics and (by implication) poets in 1709, noting that 'Nature and Homer' are 'the same.'²² As if dutifully acquiescing, even the fiery iconoclast Percy Bysshe Shelley assiduously translated Aeschylus and other Greek 'masters.' As Western society defines 'him,' the lyric poet must have aesthetic models, must in a sense speak the esoteric language of literary forms. She or he cannot simply record or describe the phenomena of nature and society, for literary theorists have long believed that, in poetry, nature must be mediated through tradition — that is, through an education in 'ancient rules.' But of course, as so many women writers learned with dismay, the traditional classics of Greek and Latin — meaning the distilled Platonic essence of Western literature, history, philosophy — constituted what George Eliot called 'spheres of masculine learning' inalterably closed to women except under the most extraordinary circumstances. Interestingly, only Barrett Browning, of all the major women

poets, was enabled — by her invalid seclusion, her sacrifice of ordinary pleasures — seriously to study 'the ancients.' Like Shelley, she translated Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, and she went even further, producing an unusually learned study of the little-known Greek Christian poets. What is most interesting about Barrett Browning's skill as a classicist, however, is the fact that it was barely noticed in her own day and has been almost completely forgotten in ours.

Suzanne Juhasz has recently and persuasively spoken of the 'double bind' of the woman poet,²³ but it seems almost as if there is a sort of triple bind here. On the one hand, the woman poet who learns a 'just esteem' for Homer is ignored or even mocked — as, say, the eighteenth-century 'Blue Stockings' were. On the other hand, the woman poet who does not (because she is not allowed to) study Homer is held in contempt. On the third hand, however, whatever alternative tradition the woman poet attempts to substitute for 'ancient rules' is subtly devalued. Ransom, for instance, asserts that Dickinson's meters, learned from 'her father's hymnbook,' are all based upon 'Folk Line, the popular form of verse and the oldest in our language,' adding that 'the great classics of this meter are the English ballads and Mother Goose.' Our instinctive sense that this is a backhanded compliment is confirmed when he remarks that 'Folk Line is disadvantageous . . . if it denies to the poet the use of English Pentameter,' which is 'the staple of what we may call the studied or "university" poetry, and . . . is capable of containing and formalizing many kinds of substantive content which would be too complex for Folk Line. Emily Dickinson appears never to have tried it.'²⁴ If we read 'pentameter' here as a substitute for 'ancient rules,' then we can see that once again 'woman' and 'poet' are being defined as contradictory terms.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, where the novel allows — even encourages — just the self-effacing withdrawal society has traditionally fostered in women, the lyric poem is in some sense the utterance of a strong and assertive 'I.' Artists from Shakespeare to Dickinson, Yeats, and T. S. Eliot have of course qualified this 'I,' emphasizing, as Eliot does, the 'extinction of personality' involved in a poet's construction of an artful, masklike persona, or insisting, as Dickinson did, that the speaker of poems is a 'supposed person.'²⁵ But, nevertheless, the central self that speaks or sings a poem must be forcefully defined, whether 'she' 'he' is real or imaginary. If the novelist, therefore, inevitably sees herself from the *outside*, as an object, a character, a small figure in a large pattern, the lyric poet must be continually aware of herself from the *inside*, as a subject, a speaker: she must be, that is, assertive, authoritative, radiant with powerful feelings while at the same time absorbed in her own consciousness — and hence, by definition, profoundly 'unwomanly,' even freakish. For the woman poet, in other words, the contradictions between her vocation and her gender might well become insupportable, impelling her to deny one or the other, even (as in the case of 'Judith Shakespeare') driving her to suicide. For, as Woolf puts it, 'who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?'

NOTES

- 6 *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Frederick G. Kenyon (2 vols. in 1, New York: Macmillan, 1899), I, 230–32. Compare Woolf's 'For we think back through our mothers if we are women. It is useless to go to the great men writers for help, however much one may go to them for pleasure' (*A Room*, p. 79).
- 7 Thomas Johnson, ed., *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), #613.
- 8 See especially 'Aurora Leigh' and 'I am Christina Rossetti' in *The Second Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932), pp. 182–92 and 214–21.
- 9 Reprinted in Richard B. Sewall, ed., *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 120. In fairness to Reeves, we should note that he quotes this statement in order to dispute it.
- 10 Theodore Roethke, 'The Poetry of Louise Bogan,' *Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke*, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965), pp. 133–34.
- 11 'Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored,' in Sewall, p. 92.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- 13 Quoted in Reeves, p. 119.
- 14 John Cody, *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 495.
- 15 Gardner B. Taplin, *The Life of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 417.
- 16 *The Edinburgh Review*, vol. 189 (1899), 420–39.
- 17 Samuel B. Holcombe, 'Death of Mrs. Browning,' *The Southern Literary Messenger*, 33 (1861), 412–17.
- 18 *The Christian Examiner*, vol. 72 (1862), 65–88.
- 19 'Poetic Aberrations,' *Blackwood's*, vol. 87 (1860), 490–94.
- 20 *A Room*, p. 65.
- 21 See Pater, 'Conclusion' to *The Renaissance*, and, for a general discussion of the poet as priest, M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: Norton, 1971).
- 22 See Pope, 'An Essay on Criticism,' Part I, 11, 135–40.
- 23 Suzanne Juhasz, *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women, A New Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 'The Double Bind of the Woman Poet,' pp. 1–6.
- 24 Ransom, *ibid.*; Sewall, pp. 99–100.
- 25 See T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' and Emily Dickinson, letter to T. W. Higginson, July 1892, in *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, Thomas Johnson, ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1958), vol. II, p. 412.

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Aurora Leigh and Other Poems

In the opening of Book V of *Aurora Leigh* there is a long discursive section

on the poet's vocation where the author dismisses the lyric mode — ballad, pastoral and Barrett Browning's own favourite, the sonnet — as static forms: the poet 'can stand/Like Atlas in the sonnet and support/His own heavens pregnant with dynastic stars;/But then he must stand still, nor take a step.' The move into epic poetry chipped at her reputation in establishment circles, but enhanced her popularity. It was a venture into a male stronghold; epic and dramatic verse are associated with the Classicists and with Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley and Tennyson, and later, Browning. In 1893 the influential critic Edmund Gosse wrote that women have achieved nothing 'in the great solid branches of poetry in epic, in tragedy, in didactic and philosophical verse. . . . The reason is apparently that the artistic nature is not strongly developed in her.' This typical retrospective judgment may be a clue to *Aurora Leigh's* modern oblivion, and one reason why such an important and diverse poet as Barrett Browning is now known almost exclusively as the author of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), her brilliant series of love lyrics to her husband. Twentieth-century male poet-critics echo Gosse's belief that women's voice in poetry, as in life, should be confined to the lyric. How can one account then for a sustained narrative poem that is both didactic and philosophical as well as passionate and female, an unmannerly intervention in the 'high' patriarchal discourse of bourgeois culture? *Aurora Leigh* makes few apologies for this rude eruption into the after-dinner subjects that go with the port and cigars. Barrett Browning knew less about 'this live throbbing age,/That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,' than Mrs Gaskell. But it is the latter, in *Mary Barton*, who intervenes with the authorial voice to offer a timid sop to male expertise: 'I am not sure if I can express myself in the technical terms of either masters or workmen. . . .'

The taboo, it is stronger than prejudice, against women's entry into public discourse as speakers or writers, was in grave danger of being definitively broken in the mid-nineteenth century as more and more educated, literate women entered the arena as imaginative writers, social critics and reformers. The oppression of women within the dominant class was in no way as materially brutal as the oppression of women of the working class, but it had its own rationale and articulation. The mid-century saw the development of a liberal 'separate but equal' argument which sometimes tangled with, sometimes included the definition of women's sphere and the development of the cult of true womanhood. The publicity given on the woman question hardly dented the continued elaboration of mores and manners which ensured that daughters were marriageable, i.e. virgins. Patriarchal dominance involved the suppression of women's speech outside the home and a rigorous censorship of what she could read or write. All the major women writers were both vulnerable to and sensitive about charges of 'coarseness'. The Brontë sisters, Sand and Barrett Browning were labelled coarse by their critics, and, occasionally, by other women. Sexual impurity, even in thought, was *the* unforgivable sin, the social lever through which Victorian culture controlled its females, and kept them from an alliance with their looser lived working-class sisters.