

THE RESISTING READER

A Feminist Approach to
American Fiction

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It has been, therefore, an understandably communal act made possible by the energy and vision of countless women who have encouraged and assisted and inspired. One part of my deepest debt has been realized by the dedication; another part has been realized in my introductory chapter, where the extensive quoting serves not simply to establish points or to share important perceptions but to express the degree of my indebtedness to the work of other women; the final part I realize now in thanking those women who in particular have given generously of their time and energy, emotional and intellectual, to the process of writing this book: Martha Warn Firestone, Carole Friedman, and Joan Schulz.

INTRODUCTION

On the Politics of Literature

I

Literature is political. It is painful to have to insist on this fact, but the necessity of such insistence indicates the dimensions of the problem. John Keats once objected to poetry "that has a palpable design upon us." The major works of American fiction constitute a series of designs on the female reader, all the more potent in their effect because they are "impalpable." One of the main things that keeps the design of our literature unavailable to the consciousness of the woman reader, and hence impalpable, is the very posture of the apolitical, the pretense that literature speaks universal truths through forms from which all the merely personal, the purely subjective, has been burned away or at least transformed through the medium of art into the representative. When only one reality is encouraged, legitimized, and transmitted and when that limited vision endlessly insists on its comprehensiveness, then we have the conditions necessary for that confusion of consciousness in which impalpability flourishes. It is the purpose of this book to give voice to a different reality and different vision, to bring a different subjectivity to bear on the old "universality." To examine American fictions in light of how attitudes toward women shape their form and content is to make available to consciousness that which

has been largely left unconscious and thus to change our understanding of these fictions, our relation to them, and their effect on us. It is to make palpable their designs.

American literature is male. To read the canon of what is currently considered classic American literature is perforce to identify as male. Though exceptions to this generalization can be found here and there—a Dickinson poem, a Wharton novel—these exceptions usually function to obscure the argument and confuse the issue: American literature is male. Our literature neither leaves women alone nor allows them to participate. It insists on its universality at the same time that it defines that universality in specifically male terms. “Rip Van Winkle” is paradigmatic of this phenomenon. While the desire to avoid work, escape authority, and sleep through the major decisions of one’s life is obviously applicable to both men and women, in Irving’s story this “universal” desire is made specifically male. Work, authority, and decision-making are symbolized by Dame Van Winkle, and the longing for flight is defined against her. She is what one must escape from, and the “one” is necessarily male. In Mailer’s *An American Dream*, the fantasy of eliminating all one’s ills through the ritual of scapegoating is equally male: the sacrificial scapegoat is the woman/wife and the cleansed survivor is the husband/male. In such fictions the female reader is co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded; she is asked to identify with a selfhood that defines itself in opposition to her; she is required to identify against herself.

The woman reader’s relation to American literature is made even more problematic by the fact that our literature is frequently dedicated to defining what is peculiarly American about experience and identity. Given the pervasive male bias of this literature, it is not surprising that in it the experience of being American is equated with the experience of being male. In Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*,

the background for the experience of disillusionment and betrayal revealed in the novel is the discovery of America, and Daisy’s failure of *Gatsby* is symbolic of the failure of America to live up to the expectations in the imagination of the men who “discovered” it. America is female; to be American is male; and the quintessential American experience is betrayal by woman. Henry James certainly defined our literature, if not our culture, when he picked the situation of women as the subject of *The Bostonians*, his very American tale.

Power is the issue in the politics of literature, as it is in the politics of anything else. To be excluded from a literature that claims to define one’s identity is to experience a peculiar form of powerlessness—not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one’s experience articulated, clarified, and legitimized in art, but more significantly the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male—to be universal, to be American—is to be *not female*. Not only does powerlessness characterize woman’s experience of reading, it also describes the content of what is read. Each of the works chosen for this study presents a version and an enactment of the drama of men’s power over women. The final irony, and indignity, of the woman reader’s relation to American literature, then, is that she is required to dissociate herself from the very experience the literature engenders. Powerlessness is the subject and powerlessness the experience, and the design insists that Rip Van Winkle/Frederic Henry/Nick Carraway/Stephen Rojack speak for us all.

The drama of power in our literature is often disguised. In “Rip Van Winkle,” Rip poses as powerless, the henpecked husband cowering before his termagant Dame. Yet, when Rip returns from the mountains, armed by the drama of female deposition witnessed there, to discover

that his wife is dead and he is free to enjoy what he has always wanted, the "Shucks, M'am, I don't mean no harm" posture dissolves. In Sherwood Anderson's "I Want to Know Why," the issue of power is refracted through the trauma of a young boy's discovery of what it means to be male in a culture that gives white men power over women, horses, and niggers. More sympathetic and honest than "Rip," Anderson's story nevertheless exposes both the imaginative limits of our literature and the reasons for those limits. Storytelling and art can do no more than lament the inevitable—boys must grow up to be men; it can provide no alternative vision of being male. Bathed in nostalgia, "I Want to Know Why" is infused with the perspective it abhors, because finally to disavow that perspective would be to relinquish power. The lament is self-indulgent; it offers the luxury of feeling bad without the responsibility of change. And it is completely male-centered, registering the tragedy of sexism through its cost to men. At the end we cry for the boy and not for the whores he will eventually make use of.

In Hawthorne's "The Birthmark," the subject of power is more explicit. The fact of men's power over women and the full implications of that fact are the crux of the story. Aylmer is free to experiment on Georgiana, to the point of death, because she is both woman and wife. Hawthorne indicates the attractiveness of the power that marriage puts in the hands of men through his description of Aylmer's reluctance to leave his laboratory and through his portrayal of Aylmer's inherent discomfort with women and sex. And why does Aylmer want this power badly enough to overcome his initial reluctance and resistance? Hitherto Aylmer has failed in all his efforts to achieve a power equal to that of "Mother" nature. Georgiana provides an opportunity for him to outdo nature by remaking her creation. And if he fails, he still will have won because he will have destroyed the earthly embodiment and repre-

sentative of his adversary. Hawthorne intends his character to be seen as duplicitous, and he maneuvers Aylmer through the poses of lover, husband, and scientist to show us how Aylmer attempts to gain power and to use that power to salve his sense of inadequacy. But even so, Hawthorne, like Anderson, is unwilling to do more with the sickness than call it sick. He obscures the issue of sexual politics behind a haze of "universals" and clothes the murder of wife by husband in the language of idealism.

Though the grotesque may serve Faulkner as a disguise in the same way that the ideal serves Hawthorne, "A Rose for Emily" goes farther than "The Birthmark" in making the power of men over women an overt subject. Emily's life is shaped by her father's absolute control over her; her murder of Homer Barron is reaction, not action. Though Emily exercises the power the myths of sexism make available to her, that power is minimal; her retaliation is no alternative to the patriarchy which oppresses her. Yet Faulkner, like Anderson and Hawthorne, ultimately protects himself and short-circuits the implications of his analysis, not simply through the use of the grotesque, which makes Emily eccentric rather than central, but also through his choice of her victim. In having Emily murder Homer Barron, a northern day-laborer, rather than Judge Stevens, the southern patriarch, Faulkner indicates how far he is willing to go in imagining even the minimal reversal of power involved in retaliation. The elimination of Homer Barron is no real threat to the system Judge Stevens represents. Indeed, a few day-laborers may have to be sacrificed here and there to keep that system going.

In *A Farewell to Arms*, the issue of power is thoroughly obscured by the mythology, language, and structure of romantic love and by the invocation of an abstract, though spiteful, "they" whose goal it is to break the good, the beautiful, and the brave. Yet the brave who is broken is Catherine; at the end of the novel Catherine is dead, Fred-

eric is alive, and the resemblance to "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Birthmark" is unmistakable. Though the scene in the hospital is reminiscent of Aylmer's last visit to Georgiana in her chambers, Hemingway, unlike Hawthorne, separates his protagonist from the source of his heroine's death, locating the agency of Catherine's demise not simply in "them" but in her biology. Frederic survives several years of war, massive injuries, the dangers of a desperate retreat, and the threat of execution by his own army; Catherine dies in her first pregnancy. Clearly, biology is destiny. Yet, Catherine is as much a scapegoat as Dame Van Winkle, Georgiana, Daisy Fay, and Deborah Rojack. For Frederic to survive, free of the intolerable burdens of marriage, family, and fatherhood, yet with his vision of himself as the heroic victim of cosmic antagonism intact, Catherine must die. Frederic's necessities determine Catherine's fate. He is, indeed, the agent of her death.

In its passionate attraction to the phenomenon of wealth, *The Great Gatsby* reveals its author's consuming interest in the issue of power. In the quintessentially male drama of poor boy's becoming rich boy, ownership of women is invoked as the index of power: he who possesses Daisy Fay is the most powerful boy. But when the rich boy, fearing finally for his territory, repossesses the girl and, by asking "Who is he," strips the poor boy of his presumed power, the resultant animus is directed not against the rich boy but against the girl, whose rejection of him exposes the poor boy's powerlessness. The struggle for power between men is deflected into safer and more certain channels, and the consequence is the familiar demonstration of male power over women. This demonstration, however, is not simply the result of a greater safety in directing anger at women than at men. It derives as well from the fact that even the poorest male gains something from a system in which all women are at some level his subjects. Rather than attack the men who represent and manifest that system, he

identifies with them and acquires his sense of power through superiority to women. It is not surprising, therefore, that the drama of *The Great Gatsby* involves an attack on Daisy, whose systematic reduction from the glamorous object of Gatsby's romantic longings to the casual killer of Myrtle Wilson provides an accurate measure of the power available to the most "powerless" male.

By his choice of scene, context, and situation, Henry James in *The Bostonians* directly confronts the hostile nature of the relations between men and women and sees in that war the defining characteristics of American culture. His honesty provides the opportunity for a clarification rather than a confusion of consciousness and offers a welcome relief from the deceptions of other writers. Yet the drama, while correctly labeled, is still the same. *The Bostonians* is an unrelenting demonstration of the extent, and an incisive analysis of the sources, of the power of men as a class over women as a class. Yet, though James laments women's oppression, and laments it because of its effects on women, he nevertheless sees it as inevitable. *The Bostonians* represents a kind of end point in the literary exploration of sex/class power; it would be impossible to see more clearly and feel more deeply and still remain convinced that patriarchy is inevitable. Indeed, there is revolution latent in James's novel, and, while he would be the last to endorse it, being far more interested in articulating and romanticizing the tragic elements in women's powerlessness, *The Bostonians* provides the material for that analysis of American social reality which is the beginning of change.

Norman Mailer's *An American Dream* represents another kind of end point. Mailer is thoroughly enthralled by the possibility of power that sexism makes available to men, absolutely convinced that he is in danger of losing it, and completely dedicated to maintaining it, at whatever cost. It is impossible to imagine a more frenzied commitment to

the maintenance of male power than Mailer's. In *An American Dream* all content has been reduced to the enactment of men's power over women, and to the development and legitimization of that act Mailer brings every strategy he can muster, not the least of which is an extended elaboration of the mythology of female power. In Mailer's work the effort to obscure the issue, disguise reality, and confuse consciousness is so frantic that the antitheses he provides to protect his thesis become in fact his message and his confusions shed a lurid illumination. If *The Bostonians* induces one to rearrange James's conceptual framework and so to make evitable his inevitable, *An American Dream* induces a desire to eliminate Mailer's conceptual framework altogether and start over. Beyond his frenzy is only utter nausea and weariness of spirit and a profound willingness to give up an exhausted, sick, and sickening struggle. In Mailer, the drama of power comes full circle; at once the most sexist writer, he is also the most freeing, and out of him it may be possible to create anew.

II

But what have I to say of *Sexual Politics* itself? Millett has undertaken a task which I find particularly worthwhile: the consideration of certain events or works of literature from an unexpected, even startling point of view. Millett never suggests that hers is a sufficient analysis of any of the works she discusses. Her aim is to wrench the reader from the vantage point he has long occupied, and force him to look at life and letters from a new coign. Hers is not meant to be the last word on any writer, but a wholly new word, little heard before and strange. For the first time we have been asked to look at literature as women; we, men, women and Ph.D.'s, have always read it as men. Who cannot point to a certain over-emphasis in the way Millett reads Lawrence or Stalin or Euripides. What matter? We are rooted in our vantage points and require transplanting which, always dangerous, involves violence and the possibility of death.

—Carolyn Heilbrun¹

The method that is required is not one of correlation but of liberation. Even the term "method" must be reinterpreted and in fact wrenched out of its usual semantic field, for the emerging creativity in women is by no means a merely cerebral process. In order to understand the implications of this process it is necessary to grasp the fundamental fact that women have had the power of naming stolen from us. We have not been free to use our own power to name ourselves, the world, or God. The old naming was not the product of dialogue—a fact inadvertently admitted in the Genesis story of Adam's naming the animals and the woman. Women are now realizing that the universal imposing of names by men has been false because partial. That is, inadequate words have been taken as adequate.

—Mary Daly²

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see—and therefore live—afresh.

—Adrienne Rich³

A culture which does not allow itself to look clearly at the obvious through the universal accessibility of art is a culture of tragic delusion, hardly viable.

—Cynthia Ozick⁴

When a system of power is thoroughly in command, it has scarcely need to speak itself aloud; when its workings are exposed and questioned, it becomes not only subject to discussion, but even to change.

—Kate Millett⁵

Consciousness is power. To create a new understanding of our literature is to make possible a new effect of that

literature on us. And to make possible a new effect is in turn to provide the conditions for changing the culture that the literature reflects. To expose and question that complex of ideas and mythologies about women and men which exist in our society and are confirmed in our literature is to make the system of power embodied in the literature open not only to discussion but even to change. Such questioning and exposure can, of course, be carried on only by a consciousness radically different from the one that informs the literature. Such a closed system cannot be opened up from within but only from without. It must be entered into from a point of view which questions its values and assumptions and which has its investment in making available to consciousness precisely that which the literature wishes to keep hidden. Feminist criticism provides that point of view and embodies that consciousness.

In "A Woman's Map of Lyric Poetry," Elizabeth Hampsten, after quoting in full Thomas Campion's "My Sweetest Lesbia," asks, "And Lesbia, what's in it for her?"⁶ The answer to this question is the subject of Hampsten's essay and the answer is, of course, nothing. But implicit in her question is another answer—a great deal, for someone. As Lillian Robinson reminds us, "and, always, *cui bono*—who profits?"⁷ The questions of who profits, and how, are crucial because the attempt to answer them leads directly to an understanding of the function of literary sexual politics. Function is often best known by effect. Though one of the most persistent of literary stereotypes is the castrating bitch, the cultural reality is not the emasculation of men by women but the *immascultation* of women by men. As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is *misogyny*.

One of the earliest statements of the phenomenon of *immascultation*, serving indeed as a position paper, is

E. Jane Showalter's "Women and the Literary Curriculum." In the opening part of her article, Showalter imaginatively recreates the literary curriculum the average young woman entering college confronts:

In her freshman year she would probably study literature and composition, and the texts in her course would be selected for their timeliness, or their relevance, or their power to involve the reader, rather than for their absolute standing in the literary canon. Thus she might be assigned any one of the texts which have recently been advertised for Freshman English: an anthology of essays, perhaps such as *The Responsible Man*, "for the student who wants literature relevant to the world in which he lives," or *Conditions of Men*, or *Man in Crisis: Perspectives on The Individual and His World*, or again, *Representative Men: Cult Heroes of Our Time*, in which thirty-three men represent such categories of heroism as the writer, the poet, the dramatist, the artist, and the guru, and the only two women included are the Actress Elizabeth Taylor and The Existential Heroine Jacqueline Onassis. . . . By the end of her freshman year, a woman student would have learned something about intellectual neutrality; she would be learning, in fact, how to think like a man.⁸

Showalter's analysis of the process of *immascultation* raises a central question: "What are the effects of this long apprenticeship in negative capability on the self-image and the self-confidence of women students?" And the answer is self-hatred and self-doubt: "Women are estranged from their own experience and unable to perceive its shape and authenticity. . . . they are expected to identify as readers with a masculine experience and perspective, which is presented as the human one. . . . Since they have no faith in the validity of their own perceptions and experiences, rarely seeing them confirmed in literature, or accepted in criticism, can we wonder that women students are so often

timid, cautious, and insecure when we exhort them to think for themselves?"⁹

The experience of immascultation is also the focus of Lee Edwards' article, "Women, Energy, and *Middlemarch*." Summarizing her experience, Edwards concludes:

Thus, like most women, I have gone through my entire education—as both student and teacher—as a schizophrenic, and I do not use this term lightly, for madness is the bizarre but logical conclusion of our education. Imagining myself male, I attempted to create myself male. Although I knew the case was otherwise, it seemed I could do nothing to make this other critically real.

Edwards extends her analysis by linking this condition to the effects of the stereotypical presentation of women in literature:

I said simply, and for the most part silently that, since neither those women nor any women whose acquaintances I had made in fiction had much to do with the life I led or wanted to lead, I was not female. Alien from the women I saw most frequently imagined, I mentally arranged them in rows labelled respectively insipid heroines, sexy survivors, and demonic destroyers. As organizer I stood somewhere else, alone perhaps, but hopefully above them.¹⁰

Intellectually male, sexually female, one is in effect no one, nowhere, immasculated.

Clearly, then, the first act of the feminist critic must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader and, by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcizing the male mind that has been implanted in us. The consequence of this exorcism is the capacity for what Adrienne Rich describes as re-vision—"the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction." And the consequence, in turn, of this re-vision is that books will no longer be read as they have

been read and thus will lose their power to bind us unknowingly to their designs. While women obviously cannot rewrite literary works so that they become ours by virtue of reflecting our reality, we can accurately name the reality they do reflect and so change literary criticism from a closed conversation to an active dialogue.

In making available to women this power of naming reality, feminist criticism is revolutionary. The significance of such power is evident if one considers the strength of the taboos against it:

I permit no woman to teach . . . she is to keep silent.

—St. Paul

By Talmudic law a man could divorce a wife whose voice could be heard next door. From there to Shakespeare: "Her voice was ever soft, Gentle, and low—an excellent thing in woman." And to Yeats: "The women that I picked spoke sweet and low/ And yet gave tongue." And to Samuel Beckett, guessing at the last torture, *The Worst*: "a woman's voice perhaps, I hadn't thought of that, they might engage a soprano."¹¹

—Mary Ellmann¹¹

The experience of the class in which I voiced my discontent still haunts my nightmares. Until my face froze and my brain congealed, I was called prude and, worse yet, insensitive, since I willfully misread the play in the interest of proving a point false both to the work and in itself.

—Lee Edwards¹²

The experience Edwards describes of attempting to communicate her reading of the character of Shakespeare's Cleopatra is a common memory for most of us who have become feminist critics. Many of us never spoke; those of us who did speak were usually quickly silenced. The need to keep certain things from being thought and said reveals to us their importance. Feminist criticism represents the discovery/recovery of a voice, a unique and uniquely powerful voice capable of canceling out those other voices, so

movingly described in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, which spoke about us and to us and at us but never for us.

III

The eight works analyzed in this book were chosen for their individual significance, their representative value, and their collective potential. They are interconnected in the ways that they comment on and illuminate each other, and they form a dramatic whole whose meaning transcends the mere sum of the parts. These eight are meant to stand for a much larger body of literature; their individual and collective designs can be found elsewhere repeatedly.

The four short stories form a unit, as do the four novels. These units are subdivided into pairs. "Rip Van Winkle" and "I Want to Know Why" are companion pieces whose focus is the fear of and resistance to growing up. The value of Anderson's story lies mainly in the light it sheds on Irving's, making explicit the fear of sexuality only implied in "Rip" and focusing attention on the strategy of deflecting hostility away from men and onto women. "The Birthmark" and "A Rose for Emily" are richly related studies of the consequences of growing up, and, by implication, of the reasons for the resistance to it. In both stories sexual desire leads to death. More significantly, they are brilliant companion analyses of that sex/class hostility that is the essence of patriarchal culture and that underlies the adult identity Anderson's boy recoils from assuming. "The Birthmark" is the story of how to murder your wife and get away with it; "A Rose for Emily" is the story of how the system which allows you to murder your wife makes it possible for your wife to murder you.

Both *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Great Gatsby* are love stories; together they demonstrate the multiple uses of the mythology of romantic love in the maintenance of male power. In addition they elaborate on the function of

scapegoating evident in "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Birthmark." In its more obvious connection of the themes of love and power, *The Great Gatsby* brings closer to consciousness the hostility which *A Farewell to Arms* seeks to disguise and bury. *The Bostonians* and *An American Dream* form the most unlikely and perhaps the most fascinating of the pairs. In both, the obfuscation of romantic love has been cleared away and the issue of power directly joined. James's novel describes a social reality—male power, female powerlessness—which Mailer's denies by creating a social mythology—female power, male powerlessness—that inverts that reality. Yet finally, the intention of Mailer's mythology is to maintain the reality it denies. *The Bostonians* forces the strategies of *An American Dream* into the open by its massive documentation of women's oppression, and *An American Dream* provides the political answer to *The Bostonians'* inevitability by its massive, though unintended, demonstration of the fact that women's oppression grows not out of biology but out of men's need to oppress.

The sequence of both the stories and the novels is generated by a scale of increasing complexity, increasing consciousness, and increasing "feminist" sympathy and insight. Thus, the movement of the stories is from the black and white of "Rip Van Winkle," with its postulation of good guy and villain and its formulation in terms of innocent fable, to the complexity of "A Rose for Emily," whose action forces sexual violence into consciousness and demands understanding for the erstwhile villain. The movement of the novels is similar. *A Farewell to Arms* is as simplistic and disguised and hostile as "Rip Van Winkle"; indeed, the two have many affinities, not the least of which is the similarity of their sleep-centered protagonists who believe that women are a bad dream that will go away if you just stay in bed long enough. The sympathy and complexity of consciousness in *The Bostonians* is even larger than that in "A Rose for Emily," and is exceeded only by

the imagination of *An American Dream*, which is "feminist" not be design but by default. Yet the decision to end with *An American Dream* comes not simply from its position on the incremental scale. *An American Dream* is "Rip Van Winkle" one hundred and fifty years later, intensified to be sure, but *exactly the same story*. Thus, the complete trajectory of the immasculating imagination of American literature is described by the movement from "Rip Van Winkle" to *An American Dream*, and that movement is finally circular. This juxtaposition of beginning and end provides the sharpest possible exposure of that circular quality in the design of our literature, apparent in the movements within and between works, which defines its imaginative limits. Like the race horse so loved by Anderson's boy, the imagination which informs our "classic" American literature runs endlessly round a single track, unable because unwilling to get out of the race.

PALPABLE DESIGNS

Four American Short Stories

An American Dream: "Rip Van Winkle"

Washington Irving is reported to have spent a June evening in 1818 talking with his brother-in-law about the old days in Sleepy Hollow. Melancholy of late, the writer was pleased to find himself laughing. Suddenly he got up and went to his room. By morning he had the manuscript of the first and most famous American short story, and his best single claim to a permanent reputation.¹

The figure of Rip Van Winkle presides over the birth of the American imagination; and it is fitting that our first successful homegrown legend should memorialize, however playfully, the flight of the dreamer from the shrew—into the mountains and out of time, away from the drab duties of home and town toward the good companions and the magic keg of beer. Ever since, the typical male protagonist of our fiction has been a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat—anywhere to avoid "civilization," which is to say, the confrontation of a man and woman which leads to the fall to sex, marriage, and responsibility.²

Engendered in melancholy, released through nostalgia, and interchanged with sleep—what better place to begin

than with Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle," the story which marked the emergence of American literature at home and abroad, which began the long dream of our fiction, and which has become an inherent part of our national mythology. In writing "Rip Van Winkle," Irving adapted to the American scene, setting, and psyche the elements of a German folk tale, itself a version of a time-honored legend. In making this translation he produced a classic statement of character and theme in American literature. As Rip is a protagonist whom one will encounter again and again in the pages of our fiction, so his story presents the fantasy woven by our writers on the underside of our national consciousness, in subconscious counterpoint to the official voice of our public rhetoric.

"Rip Van Winkle" is the dreamwork of the persona created by Benjamin Franklin in his *Autobiography*, the inevitable consequence of the massive suppressions required by Franklin's code of success. The voice to which Rip gives ear is the exact opposite of the voice embodied in the *Autobiography*, with its imperatives for self-improvement and for constant and regulated activity, for a day neatly parceled out in preplanned units, goal- and future-oriented, built on a commitment to accumulation and an investment in the notion of progress. "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise," cries Franklin, to which Rip responds with an infinite desire for sleep. If Franklin's *Autobiography* represents one kind of American success story, "Rip Van Winkle" represents another, for what his story records is the successful evasion of the demands and values that speak through Franklin. And if Franklin's book is a testament to how lucky it is to be an American, "Rip Van Winkle" is perhaps the first registering of a disillusionment with America as idea and fact which Mark Twain was later to articulate in the voice of another famous villager, Pudd'nhead Wilson: "It was wonderful to find America, but it would have been more wonderful to miss it."

central in Irving's formulation of his classic American story is the role he gives to women. The German tale on which he based "Rip" has no equivalent for Dame Van Winkle; she is Irving's creation and addition. Irving's tale is distinguished from its source by his elaboration of the psychology behind the experience of protracted sleep, and this elaboration is in turn distinguished by women's involvement in it. What drives Rip away from the village and up into the mountains and what makes him a likely partaker of the sleep-inducing liquor is his wife; all the ills from which Rip seeks escape are symbolically located in the person of the offending Dame Van Winkle. Thus, an essential part of the Americanness of Irving's story is the creation of woman as villain: as obstacle to the achievement of the dream of pleasure; as mouthpiece for the values of work, responsibility, adulthood—the imperatives of Benjamin Franklin. Significantly, Irving's tale connects the image of woman with the birth of America as a nation and with the theme of growing up.

Rip is the first in a long line of American heroes as "nice guys." He is a "great favorite" and is possessed of "universal popularity." Everybody in the village loves him; children shout with joy at his appearance and not a dog will bark at him. He is kind, simple, good-natured, and meek. He is never too busy to join the children at their sports or to run errands for the women or to assist the men in their projects. Having no concerns of his own, he responds to the needs of others. In a Benjamin Franklin world, where everyone else is busy pursuing goals, Rip represents that *summum bonum*, a person with nothing to do. His popularity derives from his availability and from a concomitant self-effacement and meekness of spirit.

There is one person with whom Rip is not popular, whom he will not serve, and whose demands go unanswered: that is, of course, his wife. The source of Rip's resistance to Dame Van Winkle is not laziness, for he will

fish and hunt all day, tramping through miles of forest and swamp, up hill and down. Nor is the source of his resistance a distaste for work, since he is glad to assist in the roughest toil of the community, whether husking Indian corn or building stone fences. Rather, Rip resists Dame Van Winkle because she represents what he ought to do. What Rip rejects is the belief that the end of work is the accumulation of profit; what he resists is the imperative "thou shalt make money." Inverting Franklin's pattern of increment, the saga of the poor boy who begins with only two loaves of bread and ends as one of the richest men in the city of Philadelphia, Rip refuses to touch his patrimonial estate and has let it dwindle until it is nothing more than a poor parched acre. Yet Rip's resistance is not simply to work as a way to profit; it is equally to work as a moral imperative—that which one ought to do as opposed to that which one wants to do. Rip is willing to do everything except what he ought to; his commitment is to pleasure and play. Like his more famous successor, Huckleberry Finn, Rip wages a subterranean and passive revolt against the superego and its imperatives.

Rip's refusal to do what he ought is in effect a refusal to be what he ought. He rejects the role of master, preferring instead to be servant; no father to his children, he is instead the playmate of others' children; his concept of political responsibility consists of listening to the contents of months-old newspapers drawled out by the village schoolmaster and commented on by the puffs from Nicholas Vedder's pipe. Although a descendant of the Van Winkles, "who figured so gallantly in the chivalrous days of Peter Stuyvesant," Rip has inherited little of the martial character of his worthy ancestors. His pleasure in hunting lies not in killing but rather in being outside, free, roaming through woods and hills at will. Indeed, his essential lack of aggression is reflected in the way he refuses the imperatives to be otherwise. Rip's idea of fighting is the passive

of evasion. And what he evades, of course, is the war between the sexes, the war between the individual and the mother country. Rip rejects the conventional image of masculinity and the behavior traditionally expected of an adult male and identifies himself with characteristics and behaviors assumed to be feminine and assigned to women. Thus, the figure who "presides over the birth of the American imagination" is in effect a female-identified woman-hater. Here is a conflict whose evasion requires all of Irving's art—and gets it; for Irving is as dedicated to avoiding conflict as his hero, sinking the history of colonial conflict in the confusion of Dutch Hendrik with English Henry, converting the tombstone connotations of R.I.P. and the death wish behind it to the fantasy of endless rebirth.

Dame Van Winkle is the unsympathetic thorn in Rip's exceedingly sympathetic side. She is the embodiment of all the values he rejects, the would-be enforcer of all the imperatives he is fleeing, the spoiler of his holiday, the enemy. "Rip Van Winkle" is one of the first American books in which man, nature, and beast (who is always male too—Rip would not go into the woods with a "bitch") are sacrosanctly linked and woman is seen as the agent of civilization that seeks to repress this holy trinity. In opposition to Rip's pleasure principle, Dame Van Winkle is voluble on the subject of work and on the value of practicality. The opposition of Rip and Dame is extended to women and men in general. In the opening paragraph Irving notes that the "good wives" of the village regard the Catskills as "perfect barometers," enabling them to forecast the weather with accuracy. How marked a contrast to the web of fancy cast over these same mountains by the narrator, Diedrich Knickerbocker. Dream states, imagination and play in "Rip Van Winkle" are clearly the prerogatives of men. The fantasy figures from the dream past who play in the Catskills are all male. Rip's "perpetual club of the

sages, philosophers, and other idle personages of the village" is all male too and is dedicated to the pure pleasure of sitting long afternoons in the shade and telling "endless sleepy stories about nothing."

Dame Van Winkle is linked to civilization and to the institutions which it is composed of in another way. She is connected to politics through the somewhat elaborated metaphor of "petticoat government" and to America's coming of age as a separate political entity by virtue of the similarity between her behavior and that of the politician Rip encounters on his return to the village; their shrill and disputatious tones are the very echo of the voice of the termagant Dame. If women are bad because they are portrayed as governmental, government is bad because it is portrayed as female. It is not hard—there are lots of pointers along the way—to get from Irving's Dame to Ken Kesey's Big Nurse, who is bad because she represents a system whose illegitimacy is underscored by the fact that *she*, a woman, represents it.

In its simplest terms, the basic fantasy "Rip Van Winkle" embodies is that of being able to sleep long enough to avoid at once the American Revolution and the wife. The story imagines and enacts a successful evasion of civilization and of the imperatives of adulthood. Rip sleeps through those years when one is expected to be politically, personally, and sexually mature and thus moves from the boyhood of youth to the boyhood of an old age that promises to go on forever. In addition, he accomplishes something else: access to life in an all-male world, a world without women, the ideal American territory. Like Melville a half-century later, Irving invokes as playground a world which is perforce exclusively male—the world of men on ships exploring new territories. Rip encounters in the mountains the classic elements of American male culture: sport invested with utter seriousness; highly

~~realized~~ nonverbal communication; liquor as communion and the mystique of male companionship. In an act of camaraderie, based on a sure and shared instinct as to the life-expectancy of termagants, the little men provide Rip with the opportunity and instrument of escape.

The experience in the mountains, however, is not simply an act of evasion, culminating in the perfect communion of males; it is equally an act of invasion, carrying out on a larger scale the pattern of Rip's "femininity" and suggesting that the secret source of his fantasy lies in a fear and envy of women. What Rip sees in the mountains is a reversal of the pattern that prevails in the village, for here it is men who invade female territory and dominate it and drive the women out. The material appended as postscript to the story gains its significance in light of this reversal. The postscript contains Indian legends, the first of which concerns the old squaw spirit who ruled the Catskills and "influenced the weather, spreading sunshine or clouds over the landscape, and sending good or bad hunting seasons." Rip's vision in the mountains displaces this legend, making men the gods of weather and relegating women to the position of mere interpreters of their thunder. "Rip Van Winkle" constitutes a patriarchal revolution in miniature in which men assume the powers previously accorded to women and female-centered myths are replaced by male-centered myths. Emblematic of this displacement, the legend of the old squaw spirit is appended as postscript, while the epigraph of the story is an invocation to Woden, God of Saxons, whose son and sometimes other self was Thor, god of thunder.

When Rip awakens from his sleep in the mountains, his first concern is his wife—what excuse can he make to her for his "overnight" absence from home. This concern, however, soon gives way to a larger sense of unease. His clean, well-oiled gun has been replaced by a rusty old fire-

lock with a worm-eaten stock; his dog is nowhere to be found; there is no sign anywhere of the men he encountered in the mountains or of the place where they played. Metaphorically as well as literally Rip, upon awakening, is out of joint. Unease moves toward terror as Rip returns to the village and it becomes clearer and clearer to him that the world he left is not the world he has returned to. Like the Catskills, with which he has such an affinity, Rip seems "dismembered," something left behind on a great drive forward, onward, westward. With each succeeding encounter his sense of himself becomes more and more confused until at last, when forced to identify himself, he can only cry, "I'm not myself—I'm somebody else—that's me yonder—no—that's somebody else got into my shoes—I was myself last night, but I fell asleep on the mountain, and they've changed my gun, and everything's changed, and I'm changed, and I can't tell what's my name, or who I am."

"Rip Van Winkle" is a fantasy tinged with terror, a dreamwork with hints of nightmare. Yet its tone is finally one of reconciliation and incorporation. In "Rip Van Winkle" one can go home again. Rip's village eventually believes his statement that he means no harm, dismisses its view of him as lunatic or spy, and accords him the identity of returning hero. He is embraced as one who is connected by his age to what is now perceived as that more pleasant past before the Revolution and by his experience in the mountains to that still more pleasant past before America ever was, to that time when it was still an idea in the mind of Europe. He is the one who has rejected the identities handed to him, the "perfumes" of "houses and rooms" which Whitman resists at the opening of "Song of Myself"; who has experienced the fears attendant upon such a rejection, and who has nevertheless emerged as living proof that it can be done. He has indulged the communal dream of escape from all forms of responsibility and all the forces

threaten the life of pleasure. Having slept through those years when adulthood is expected, he is allowed to remain now and forever a boy. Perceiving as he does that all that has happened in his absence is the exchange of one George for another, Rip inevitably suggests that the most meaningful relationship one can have to the Revolution is to have slept through it. His experience in the mountains at once displaces the events of the Revolution and presents itself as the logical substitute for them. The real act of rebellion in Irving's tale is Rip's, and it is he who has enacted the real American Revolution. Thus, it is proper that he is recognized by the little men as one fit to join that long line of heroes who have disappeared into mountains where they sleep and wait until their time and world is ready.³

But what is a woman to do with "Rip Van Winkle"? How is she to read our "first and most famous" story in which the American imagination is born if the defining act of that imagination is to identify the real American Revolution with the avoidance of adulthood, which means the avoidance of women, which means the avoidance of one's wife? What is the impact of this American dream on her? The answer is obvious: disastrous. What is an essentially simple act of identification when the reader of the story is male becomes a tangle of contradictions when the reader is female. Where in this story is the female reader to locate herself? Certainly she is not Rip, for the fantasy he embodies is thoroughly male and is defined precisely by its opposition to woman. Nor is she Dame Van Winkle, for Dame is not a person: she is a scapegoat, the enemy, the OTHER. Without name or identity other than that of Rip's Dame, she is summarized, explained, and dismissed through the convention of stereotypes as a "termagant wife," a shrew, a virago. Because she is abstracted and reduced to a stereotype whose mechanism she endlessly repeats, her death is presented as a joke on that mechanism

and is viewed as a great relief. Dame Van Winkle is a male mechanism, not a woman. What, then, of her daughter Judith, who takes Rip in where Dame threw him out and who appears to be a pleasant alternative to her mother? Yet, what is Judith really except her mother married to someone other than her father? Marry her to her brother and, sure enough, you would have a daughter as like the mother as the son is like the father.

The woman who reads "Rip Van Winkle" finds herself excluded from the experience of the story. She is no part of the act of resistance, nor does she recognize herself in that which is being resisted. Indeed, the full extent of her exclusion can be seen in the fact that those qualities which are potentially admirable aspects of the female role are assigned to Rip and made positive because they are part of his character, while what is negative about the male role is accorded to Dame Van Winkle, who is made a masculine authority figure and damned for it.

It would be nice if the female reader, upon realizing the dimensions of her exclusion from the story, could dismiss "Rip Van Winkle" as having nothing to do with her. Unfortunately, however, the story enforces a certain experience on her. While not identifying with Dame Van Winkle, she nevertheless cannot fully escape the sense of being somehow implicated in the indictment of her sex that Dame Van Winkle represents. She cannot read the story without being assaulted by the negative images of women it presents. Primary among them is that view, as pervasive in American literature as it is in Western culture, of women as each other's natural and instinctive enemies: "Certain it is that he was a great favorite among the good wives of the village, who, as usual with the amiable sex, took his part in all family squabbles and never failed, whenever they talked those matters over in their evening gossipings, to lay all the blame on Dame Van Winkle." Surely this is one of Irving's nastier ironies, an example of

Philip Young calls his "whimsical antifeminism."⁴ The real rub is the fact that the story forces the female reader to enact its definition of her sex. A woman reading "Rip Van Winkle" becomes perforce one of Irving's "good women," taking Rip's side and laying all the blame on Dame Van Winkle; that is the way the story is written. The consequence for the female reader is a divided self. She is asked to identify with Rip and against herself, to scorn the amiable sex and act just like it, to laugh at Dame Van Winkle and accept that she represents "woman," to be at once both repressor and repressed, and ultimately to realize that she is neither. Rip's words upon returning home after his twenty-year evasion are ironically appropriate to her: "I'm not myself—I'm somebody else—that's me yonder—no—that's somebody else . . . I can't tell what's my name, or who I am."

The somewhat ironic tone Irving adopts toward his material might be adduced as evidence of a certain complexity to his immasculating imagination. He puts the story in the mouth of Diedrich Knickerbocker, who has already been established as a figure of fun in *Knickerbocker's History of New York*. The frame of the story makes us aware that there is more than one teller of this tale, and we would be wrong to miss the ironic Irving behind the dreamy Knickerbocker. The difficulty, however, is that Irving's irony seems finally a gesture, a sop thrown to the critical faculties of his readers so that he may the more successfully float his fantasy. Irving is still committed to his dream and to the antifeminism underlying it, despite the fact that he casts it as a joke. For however much he may mock Rip and protest that his tale is but a fantasy, Dame Van Winkle is still stuck with the stigmata of her shrewdness and the effect of Irving's story is still to make escaping her a national good, an American dream.