Dorothea or Jane? The Dilemmas of Early Feminist Criticism

MARTHA VICINUS

I have never forgotten a comment made by a friend at the first feminist meeting, held in Bloomington Indiana, in the spring of 1969: “Nothing travels faster than an idea whose time has come.” We were amazed and thrilled to discover how much we had in common with other women, and how the women’s movement in its early stages gave us permission to express in public a variety of extreme emotions. All of us at that meeting were young, untenured faculty and graduate students, and suddenly—or at least so it seemed—we could speak out against authority. And sometimes authority listened. We quickly turned to writing, our natural medium, for we realized that our academic work had an immediate resonance with our political ambitions. How rare and special this moment was for those of us who worked on the literature of dead authors!

Something was clearly awry with literary criticism in the early 1970s, even though it had already moved away from the hermetic New Criticism of the Cold War years. It is striking how few women writers were read before 1970. Only three women made it into Dorothy van Ghent’s important 1953 *The English Novel: Form and Function*: Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, and George Eliot. Virginia Woolf is the only woman included in Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1957), that other required book when I was in graduate school. Vineta Colby’s 1970 *The Singular Anomaly* is an early look at Victorian women’s didactic fiction. She clearly felt that she was outside the mainstream, and so claimed “the fact that the novelists are [all] women is relatively unimportant,” but then went on to prove the opposite.1 In sharp contrast, that same year, Kate Millett published her wonderfully polemical *Sexual Politics*, which brilliantly excoriated not only the Anglo-American critical tradition, but also canonized male writers who had written on sex, violence, and women. Norman Mailer probably

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*Marta Vicinus* is the Eliza M. Mosher Distinguished University Professor Emerita at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She was fortunate to be the editor of *Victorian Studies* from 1970 to 1981, pivotal years for feminist criticism. She has published on working-class literature, Victorian women, nineteenth-century theater, and the history of sexuality.
never recovered from her uncompromising attack; he used his consider-
able literary power to attack Millett repeatedly.

Feminist criticism soon had both a public and an academic audi-
ence. Victorianists led the way. We quickly tackled two major tasks: first
to change the terms of literary criticism and then to expand the canon
to include neglected women writers. Driven by political energy, we quar-
ried novels for specific scenes that demonstrated female anger and ambi-
tion. There was little distance, and certainly no irony, between us and the
authors we wrote about; we denounced the condescension of Elizabeth
Rigby and Matthew Arnold and cheered on our few allies, such as
George Henry Lewes. Literature became more relevant than ever before;
it was not only intellectual and psychological nourishment—it had polit-
ical importance in the here-and-now.

The most influential attack on male critics, as opposed to male writ-
ers, was Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic*
(1979). They trace how women writers systematically received patronizing
reviews, from the nineteenth century till the present day. Their introduc-
tion wittily documents the numerous sexual metaphors male critics used,
from Edward Said’s insistence on “the imagery of succession, of *paternity*,
or hierarchy”\(^2\) to Anthony Burgess’s dismissal of Jane Austen’s novel for
lacking “a strong male thrust” and William Gass’s comment that literary
women “lack that blood congested genital drive that energizes every great
style.”\(^3\) In our feminist eyes, these critics seemed only a bit cruder than
their Victorian predecessors—and perhaps on a par with Norman
Mailer.

Feminists widened the canon of Victorian literature in new and
exciting ways. Thanks to Elaine Showalter’s pioneering work *A
Literature of Their Own* (1977), we soon discovered how many forgotten
women writers were worth reading; her outline of “the female tradition”
in fiction was an enormously helpful guide to neglected women writers
and a stepping-off point for our own research. Cora Kaplan began her
important work on women poets, starting with her 1975 anthology *Salt
and Bitter and Good*. Over the ensuing decades major work was under-
taken on women poets. *Victorian Poetry* can now boast of a very different
lineup of critical essays than those it published in the 1970s. In 1981 I
suggested that popular plays were an important vehicle for expressing
the fears, economic and moral, of working women. Nina Auerbach
taught us that the demonic, disruptive woman was the other side of
the angel in the house. Linda Peterson showed us how important autobi-
ography was for the Victorians, and for us. Sally Mitchell and Vineta...
Colby wrote revisionary biographies of Frances Power Cobbe and Vernon Lee, documenting the broad influence of women’s nonfiction prose; we now know that Cobbe, Lee, and numerous other writers vigorously participated in the public debates on religious belief, art history, aestheticism, women’s rights, immigration, and numerous other contemporary issues. We learned to take women’s ideas about nineteenth-century political and social problems seriously through the work of careful scholars immersed in the archives.

Probably the best-known opening sentence from the 1970s is Gilbert and Gubar’s “Is a pen a metaphorical penis?” But other feminists preferred a statement of fact—more George Eliot than Charlotte Brontë. Nevertheless, we all spoke with an absolute certitude that examining women writers was an important, indeed a crucial activity. For example, in the introduction to Suffer and Be Still, I open with the comment: “The Women’s Liberation Movement has brought back to life, if not academic respectability, the study of women. . . . there has been widespread distrust in the new field of women studies.” I self-consciously never mention specific male critics, but assume that my subject—Victorian women—is important and will be recognized as such. A similar tone is struck in Patricia Meyer Spacks’s The Female Imagination (1975) and Ellen Moers’s Literary Women (1976). They too begin with a clear, factual rather than metaphoric, opening statement of women’s unequal status in a male world. Spacks begins her first chapter with a two-sentence paragraph: “Theories by women about women have only recently begun to appear in print. Theories by men about women are abundant.” Moers opens with “A woman’s life is hard in its own way, as women have always known and men have rarely understood.” As teachers, we feminists wished to convert, to share our energizing belief that books mattered, especially books about and by women. Persuasion demanded calm, and some concealment, of the emotions.

Spacks also argued that the singular weakness of feminist criticism was its plurality of perspectives. But I think that feminism derived its greatest strength from a willingness to take theoretical ideas and link them to women’s issues. Early work used paradigms derived from Karl Marx, Jacques Lacan, or Harold Bloom. Theories of class divisions could be easily mapped onto gender inequality; theories of the unconscious fueled our examination of how female emotions might be expressed. Gilbert and Gubar expanded Bloom’s notion of the anxiety of influence to include women writers’ overarching anxiety about participating in a male-dominated profession. By the 1980s, feminists engaged
in an exhilarating series of disagreements with each other. Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987), using a Foucauldian perspective, argued convincingly that women writers were not repressed, but rather powerful proponents of women’s importance as creators of domestic authority. Catherine Gallagher’s *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832–1867* (1985) introduced New Historicism as an effective tool for feminists. These two theoretical positions proved to be as influential as what we now might call “pure feminism.” Moreover, an openness to different perspectives freed lesbian critics, led by Bonnie Zimmerman and Lillian Faderman, and African American critics, led by Barbara Christian and Deborah McDowell, as well as made possible Gayatri Spivak’s important mid-1980s intervention in studies of British imperialism. What unites all of these studies, however, is the absolute sense that women were not simple victims of gender stereotyping, but rather active creators of literatures that responded to the circumstances of women.

Periodicals in our field were quite slow in accepting articles from a feminist perspective. *Victorian Studies* made an early splash with a special issue on women in 1971, but it was another decade before articles on women writers or women’s issues became a common feature. *Victorian Poetry*, perhaps because the field itself was of little interest to most scholars in the 1970s, was especially slow in acknowledging the wealth of nineteenth-century women poets beyond Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti. But *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* was little better. Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that *Signs* and *Feminist Studies*, to name two of the best-known early feminist journals, published numerous groundbreaking articles across a wide range of fields. Some are still required reading, such as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s “The Female World of Love and Ritual” in the first issue of *Signs* and Sherry Ortner’s “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” in the second issue of *Feminist Studies*.

My title juxtaposes two favorite heroines of feminist critics of Victorian literature. Unconsciously, I was hearkening back to *A Literature of Their Own*, which documents how nineteenth-century critics tended “to polarize the female literary tradition” as a kind of rivalry between George Eliot or Charlotte Brontë, the literature of the intellect or of the body. As Showalter pointed out, it was hard for other nineteenth-century women writers to escape these two giants. Even when their writing bore little resemblance to either author, contemporaries found it convenient to examine their work through this familiar
dichotomy. In the 1970s we were still thinking in terms of this rivalry ourselves: As young intellectuals, did we identify with thoughtful Eliot or did we prefer outspoken Brontë?

Initially *Jane Eyre* fed our hunger for a fully embodied, forthright heroine. Adrienne Rich in “The Temptations of a Motherless Child,” speaks of returning repeatedly to *Jane Eyre* for the “nourishment” it gave her, for its “survival value.” Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* shifted this metaphor away from the reader, toward how women writers themselves used metaphors of hunger. In their study, heroine after heroine suffers from hunger, starvation, and madness when faced with overwhelming circumstances. In the 1970s and early 80s, feminist critics focused on extremes of emotion, probably because we were negotiating them in our own lives. But we were also interested in what Sandra Gilbert called “Plain Jane’s Progress.” We quoted Jane with relish: “Women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts just as much as their brothers do.” These were words we had often thought—and believed that by staying in school, we had achieved. But as Gilbert reminds us, Victorian reviewers were far more disturbed by Jane’s pride and ambition than by her love for a married Byronic hero. The misogyny of male academics and writers of the 1970s was surely rooted in their fear that feminists were too ambitious, too eager to replace them in positions of power—we too had too much pride and ambition.

In contrast to the passionate, hungering Jane, we rather neglected Eliot’s heroines. We knew that *Middlemarch* was a great novel; we identified with Maggie Tulliver’s struggle for education; and we respected Mrs. Transome’s frustrations. But many of us in the 1970s found Dorothea’s willingness to sacrifice herself to Casaubon’s request, and his timely death, too Victorian, too much a concession to wifely norms. And why did Maggie Tulliver have to drown in the arms of her harsh, unforgiving brother? Eliot seemed altogether too eager to teach women readers to accept what we feared, that even though we had just found a new purpose in our work, we might still fail. Far more interesting was Eliot’s life. I loved her honest confrontation with her father in regard to her growing agnosticism, and their compromise that she would attend church but did not need to take part in the service. I was fascinated by her unacknowledged role as the editor of the *Westminster Review* under the feckless John Chapman. Yet repeatedly the question arose: Why did she not give her heroines at least a small portion of what she had achieved? The answer is obvious: as Kate Millett pointed out, since she
was “living in sin,’ George Eliot lived the [feminist] revolution,” and “did not, could not, write about it.” She might like the idea of a marriage between equals, but she knew herself too well to assume that it could ever happen.

Nevertheless, I believe that Brontë and Eliot are more similar than any schematic division between anger and self-control, body and intellect, might indicate. Indeed, feminist critical work of the 1970s, including fresh biographies of the two, soon moved us away from metaphors of hunger and nurturance to fire and fulfillment. We came to recognize how subtly our favorite authors undermined female self-sacrifice. They showed their readers how to place limits on womanly self-sacrifice by placing their heroines in profoundly disruptive situations. While not all their heroines rose to a larger-than-life status, virtually all suffer passionate moments when they are consumed by demonic thoughts. Often these verged on melodrama, breaking the surface realism of the text in order to express irrational, unacceptable, emotions, dreams, and nightmares. These dramatic extremes certainly suited our feminist temperament; we found them as energizing as the Victorians did.

Both Jane and Dorothea are overcome by anger, fear, and despair at different times, but they then learn from these emotions; reason follows rage. Passionate emotions—eruptive anger, desire, or fear—force them to change. Faced with a choice between duty and love, private need and public acceptance, earthly demands and a higher law, the isolated heroine struggles to choose, to hold on to her own needs. Brontë’s Jane Eyre has the attractive characteristic of expressing her anger directly to the man who is endangering her sense of self: John Reed, Rev. Brocklehurst, Mr. Rochester, St. John Rivers—all bear the sting of Jane’s truth-telling. But in each case, after speaking out, Jane must make a decision about what to do next. So, too, must Dorothea learn hard lessons, when confronted with her profound disillusionment with, even hatred of, Casaubon, and later with her traumatic disappointment in Ladislaw. Perhaps the most distressing aspect of Dorothea is how often she suffers alone and in silence; yet even under these circumstances, readers can detect Eliot’s sympathy for socially unacceptable emotions.

If we consider pivotal scenes in Jane Eyre and Middlemarch, we can see how carefully Brontë and Eliot have prepared readers to accept the independent action of their heroines. Self-sacrifice has a limit. Of course, every novelist must create these moments in her plot, but for 1970s feminists, it was the passionate insistence on a woman’s right to act independently that most resonated. Volume 3, chapter 9 of Jane Eyre is one long
melodramatic account of Jane’s fiery confrontation with St. John Rivers’s icy insistence that she must marry him and become a missionary. Brontë frames their conversations as Jane’s struggle between the spiritual temptation of self-sacrifice and the absolute necessity of honoring her own soul’s needs. Jane’s repeated offer to accompany St. John as his sister comes from a profound belief in the necessity of independence: “There would be recesses in my mind which would be only mine, to which he never came; and sentiments growing there fresh and sheltered, which his austerity could never blight, nor his measured warrior-march trample down: but as his wife—at his side always and always restrained, and always checked—forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly and never utter a cry, though the imprisoned flame consumed vital after vital—this would be unendurable” (429). As Jane coolly tells us, looking back on St. John’s power over her, “I was almost as hard beset by him [St. John] now as I had been once before, in a different way, by another. I was a fool both times. To have yielded then would have been an error of principle; to have yielded now would have been an error of judgment” (441). She cannot choose spiritual passion, however tempting, in lieu of a lost erotic love, because she would lose a fundamental part of herself. Even when Jane hears Rochester call out, she takes time by herself to pray and to “ponder” her own needs.

Eliot explores disruptive passions more analytically, but with no less sympathy. Dorothea, like Jane, must be tested twice by waves of overwhelming despair. First, Dorothea fights a bout of “rebellious anger” against Casaubon, in which the narrator repeatedly uses metaphors of imprisonment. Even Casaubon notices that “her wifely devotedness was like a penitential expiation of unbelieving thoughts.” Dorothea’s sense of suffocation is quite similar to that of Jane’s response to St. John. She feels she has had to “shut her best soul in prison, paying it only hidden visits, that she might be petty enough to please him. In such a crisis as this, some women begin to hate” (349; emphasis mine). In her anger, she seeks ways to hurt him, to “voice her resentment.” Acute readers will remember chapter 15, and Madame Laure’s very public murder of her husband in a French melodrama. Dorothea, however, is our heroine, and so begins her private “meditative struggle,” which “changed continually, as that of a man who begins with a movement toward striking and ends with conquering his desire to strike. The energy that would animate a crime is not more than is wanted to inspire a resolved submission, when the noble habit of the soul reasserts itself”
She goes to her husband to help him. After leaving St. John, Jane prayed alone for guidance, her “soul rushed out,” to thank God, and to act on her considered decision to return to Thornfield.

A second, final moment of anger is more searing for Dorothea: the loss of hope is worse than hatred. Dorothea recognizes her own extreme feelings most fully nights before she and Ladislaw stand at the window watching the thunderstorm. Only when she thinks that he is having an affair with Rosamond does Dorothea admit to herself that she loves that “bright creature whom she had trusted.” Eliot returns again to the suffocating prison-like conditions of her marriage to Casaubon, for Dorothea remembers Ladislaw in Rome, when he “had come to her like the spirit of morning visiting the dim vault where she sat as the bride of a worn-out life; and now, with a full consciousness which had never awakened before, she stretched her arms towards him and cried with bitter cries that their nearness was a parting vision: she discovered her passion to herself in the unshrinking utterance of despair” (643; emphasis mine). Dorothea’s mental anguish is matched by her physical actions. Filled with the fire of anger toward Will, Dorothea paces the floor and gestures angrily at her lost lover; she spends the night on the cold floor, sobbing herself to sleep. When she rises at dawn, she feels her soul has been “liberated from its terrible conflict.” Dorothea considers how to turn her grief into some good, and so is rewarded with Rosamond’s act of kindness.

While Brontë used disruptive moments of irrationality, anger, and horror to highlight the absolute necessity of honoring one’s own soul, Eliot used such moments as opportunities for searching how one’s soul could reach out to another’s. Both Jane and Dorothea suffer an ebbing away of self-respect that includes a profound sense of entrapment and personal diminishment. Anger, fear, and hatred threaten to overwhelm them, and each feels imprisoned and suffocating under uncontrollable circumstances. Brontë and Eliot subtly define female resistance, both to external pressure and to internal desires. Jane and Dorothea, brought to an emotional extreme, struggle with the temptation of self-sacrifice, whether it be missionary work or service to an unloved husband; in the process they come to trust their own self-knowledge.

Critical attention in the 1970s highlighted the disruptive emotions we shared with these heroines. Now different times demand different responses. When I recently reread the final pages of *Middlemarch*, I saw something fresh, a glint of humor that was so often lost in the 1970s feminist criticism. We could be funny about ourselves, but rarely about our
favorite heroines. In chapter 84, just before Mr. Brooke bustles in to report Dorothea’s impending marriage to Ladislaw, his friends are gathered at Sir James Chettam’s home to discuss the initial failure of the First Reform Bill. Celia’s contribution to the conversation about retaining traditional hierarchies echoes the opening chapter, for she “confessed it was nicer to be ‘Lady’ than ‘Mrs,’ and that Dodo never minded about precedence if she could have her own way” (664). This comfortable acceptance of the status quo is precisely what made us, and I believe Eliot, so angry. But it is also a lovely example of how Eliot could poke fun at her high-minded heroine. I wish that Eliot had let Celia play a larger role in the plot, beyond the delicious opening chapters. Everyday realism is not nearly as much fun as passionate, disruptive moments, but surely just as important. Dorothea did not always get her own way and neither did feminists of the 1970s, but we did change the direction of literary criticism and the canon of English literature—two enormous achievements that demanded anger, self-righteousness, and sometimes considerable self-sacrifice.

Notes

1. Colby, Anomaly, 1.
2. Gilbert and Gubar, Madwoman, 5.
5. Spacks, Imagination, 9.
7. Showalter, Literature of Their Own, 103.
9. Brontë, Jane Eyre, 115. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
10. Millett, Sexual Politics, 192.
11. Eliot, Middlemarch, 342. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.

Works Cited


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Emily Dickinson,” and Gillian Beer’s “Beyond Determinism: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf.”


