

**SANDRA GILBERT AND SUSAN GUBAR THE MADWOMAN IN THE ATTIC (1979):
“INFECTION IN THE SENTENCE: THE WOMAN WRITER AND THE ANXIETY OF AUTHORSHIP”**

In this theoretical chapter of one of the seminal works of Feminist literary criticism, Gilbert and Gubar seek to define what it means to be a woman writer in a patriarchal culture where, since time immemorial, the pen has consciously and unconsciously been conceptualised as a metaphorical penis and the author viewed in terms of a father who ‘inseminates’ a text with his meaning. The central question for Feminists, according to Gilbert and Gubar, is thus:

does the Queen try to sound like the King, imitating his tone, his inflections, his phrasing, his point of view? Or does she ‘talk back’ to him in her own vocabulary, her own timbre, insisting on her own viewpoint? (46)

To answer this, Gilbert and Gubar go back to the theories of literary history proffered by Harold Bloom, to wit, his account of the process by which writers “assimilate and then consciously or unconsciously affirm or deny the achievements of their predecessors” (46). They find Bloom’s theory of the ‘anxiety of influence’ particularly useful in this respect, to be precise, the writer’s “fear that he is not his own creator and that the works of his predecessors . . . assume essential priority over his own writings” (46). Gilbert and Gubar underscore that Bloom’s Oedipal model of the ‘strong poet’ (whereby a “man can only become a poet by somehow invalidating his poetic father” [47]) is undoubtedly a masculinist one but one, as such, eminently suited to understanding the patrilinearity of Western literary history and the “psychosexual and sociosexual con-texts by which every literary text is surrounded” (47). They contend that Bloom’s theory less recommends or perpetuates than it analyses the “patriarchal poetics and attendant anxieties which underlie our culture’s chief literary movements” (48).

There are two questions which accordingly present themselves to Gilbert and Gubar. Firstly, can feminist critics speak of and thus study, as Elaine Showalter does, for example, the existence of an autonomous tradition of women writers? Gilbert and Gubar seem uncomfortable with the idea that one can completely sever the ties linking women’s writing with the male-dominated canon. Moreover, even if this were desirable, they do not want to simply reverse Bloom’s model and to speak, thus, of a similar Oedipal process dominating relations between literary women, especially given the questions surrounding the applicability of Freud’s essentially androcentric theories to women and the controversial nature of his model of femininity. Secondly, if the answer to the first question is no, where and how can / does the female writer (especially earlier ones like the Brontës) fit into the male literary tradition as described by Bloom? How can his theory of the ‘anxiety of influence’ be adapted to explain the female tradition? In answer to this, Gilbert and Gubar assert that women writers experience what they term an “anxiety of authorship” (49) for the simple reason that

she must confront precursors who are almost exclusively male, and therefore significantly different from her. Not only do these precursors incarnate patriarchal authority . . . , they attempt to enclose her in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her sense of self—that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity. (48)

For the female writer, the ‘anxiety of authorship’ consists, thus, in the “radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a ‘precursor’ the act of writing will isolate or destroy her” (49).

Moreover, Gilbert and Gubar argue that just as the male artist’s struggle against his predecessor takes the form of what Bloom calls revisionary swerves, flights, misreadings, so the female writer’s battle for self-creation involves her in a revisionary process . . . not against her (male) predecessor’s reading of the world but against his reading of *her*. In order to define herself as an author she must redefine the terms of her socialization. Her revisionary struggle . . . often becomes a struggle for what Adrienne Rich has called ‘Revision--the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction. . . . (49)

Importantly, according to Gilbert and Gubar, the female writer often can begin such a struggle “only by seeking a *female* precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by

example that a revolt against patriarchal authority is possible" (49). In other words, where, for Bloom, the paternal relationship between the male writer and his predecessor is inherently conflictual and accordingly conceptualised in Oedipal terms, literary maternity is, by contrast, exemplary and peaceful, according to Gilbert and Gubar. It is in this way that the female writer seeks to "legitimize her own rebellious endeavours" (50).

At the same time, it is a fact that one of the consequences of living in a patriarchal society is that women experience their gender "as a painful obstacle or even a debilitating inadequacy" (50). Thus, Gilbert and Gubar contend that the

loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for sisterly predecessors and successors, her urgent sense of her need for a female audience together with her fear of the antagonism of male readers, her culturally-conditioned timidity about self-dramatization, her dread of the patriarchal authority of art, her anxiety about the impropriety of female invention – all these phenomena of 'inferiorization' mark the woman writer's struggle for artistic self-definition and differentiate her efforts at self-creation from those of her male counterpart. (50)

From this point of view, for both male and female writers, "literary texts are coercive, imprisoning . . . literature usurps a reader's interiority, it is an invasion of privacy" (52).