

Sandra Gilbert and Feminism's Endless Rage

By Bruce Bawer

The recent death of Sandra M. Gilbert at the age of 87 sent my mind reeling back decades to the first time I came across her name. With Susan Gubar (who still lives), Gilbert wrote *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, which is now regarded as a pathbreaking text of feminist criticism and which came out the same year, 1979, that I began graduate study in English literature.



Women's March on Washington, Washington DC 2017 (New China TV Youtube)

Madwoman was one of the first shots in a revolution in literary studies that has, in one form or another, been underway ever since. It's hard to imagine it now, but there were actually professors in our English department who opposed the proposition to add a feminist critic to the faculty – not because they opposed women's rights, but because they viewed feminist criticism as a political project rather than one of aesthetic inquiry. And they were right. But they lost that battle, and for those old-timers who fiercely opposed the politicization of literary studies, it was the beginning of the end.

In a 2021 [interview](#), Gilbert and Gubar recounted how their classic had come into being. Together they'd taught a course in women's writing, and for both of them it was "an experience of consciousness-raising," "a revelation," "an apocalypse." Why? Gilbert: "Suddenly we were reading only female writers, all together in the classroom, and finding incredible connections. I would go home every night just gasping in amazement." Never before, the women explained, had either of them ever studied female writers.

Really? They were professors of English literature and had never studied Jane Austen, the Bröntes, George Eliot, Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, or Virginia Woolf? All I know is that *I* studied them, and it didn't take a feminist professor to lead me to them. But then again, I didn't read them to discover apocalyptic feminist messages between the lines. I read them because they were great literature – a concept that people like Gilbert and Gubar have done a great deal to wipe off the academic map. (Incidentally, my favorite novel was by a woman, Mary Renault – about whom I knew enough to recognize that she'd have been as put off by Gilbert and Gubar's narrow enterprise as I was.) **(READ MORE from Bruce Bawer: [Dana Gioia on the Opera, From Tosca to Sweeney Todd](#))**

Anyway, Gilbert and Gubar's feminist criticism won the day. It swept through America's English departments like a tornado. In 1985, W.W. Norton published a massive volume, edited by Gilbert and Gubar, entitled *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Traditions in English*. New editions followed in 1990, 1996, and 2007.

The fact that the latest edition of their anthology came out almost two decades ago points to an uncomfortable (for them) fact: Gilbert and Gubar's victory was short-lived. Indeed, the brand of feminist criticism that they championed in the late 70s and 80s looks almost quaint now.

Gilbert and Gubar's Privileged 'White' Feminism

For theirs was a middle- and upper-middle-class feminism, a white feminism. It was a feminism that took its cues from Virginia Woolf, a rich and privileged woman who belonged to an elite circle of highly cultured Londoners and who was waited on by servants day and night, but who nonetheless saw herself as cruelly oppressed. (Gilbert and Gubar, by the way, weren't too badly off either: Gilbert went to Cornell, NYU, and Columbia, and taught at places like Stanford and Princeton; Gubar went to CCNY, Michigan, and Iowa, and spent her career – she's now retired – teaching at Indiana.)

No, Gilbert and Gubar were only the start. After they kicked it off, Women's Studies developed in much the same way as the Reign of Terror in France, with each new wave of rebels being replaced and slaughtered – in this case only metaphorically – by the next. Soon enough, for example, black women came along and insisted that they were far more oppressed than their well-off white sisters and therefore deserved to run the movement. (They even came up with their own word, womanism, as a means of distinguishing their own battle against both male sexism *and* white racism from white women's war on the patriarchy.)

Latina women, too, demanded a slice of the cake. So did lesbians and, later, those women who chose to identify themselves, more broadly and meaninglessly, as queer. Finally the trans women marched in and cowed all the others into submission, thereby bringing the whole thing full circle, with biological women once again being put in their place by biological men. Somewhere along the way the movement embraced the concept of intersectionality, which views sexism as only one ingredient in an elaborate gumbo of oppression, along with racism, classism, and so on.

At the same time, the blatantly political preoccupations of Gilbert and Gubar were largely supplanted by postmodern theory, which distances itself from reality – and which, of course, includes gender ideology, a preposterous phenomenon that wasn't even on Gilbert and Gubar's radar when they started out. Still another new twist was that Women's Studies, which had originally stood up for oppressed women in the Third World, now taught that white women had no right to criticize men of color, no matter how much they abused their wives and daughters; to do so was to become tools of Western hegemony.

In the midst of this maelstrom, Gilbert and Gubar and other second-wave feminists, as they're called (if you're counting, the movement is now on its fourth wave), had to do their best to keep up, to stay relevant, to try not to be given the heave-ho by their successors. This required them to continually adjust their own most deeply held beliefs, their own politics, and their own rhetoric to the movement's latest priorities. It wasn't easy. At one point Gubar found herself being told by newer arrivals to Women's Studies that she was a "trogolodyte," insufficiently devoted to theory and promoting female writing that was deficient in its representation of lesbians and women of color.

But they gave it the old college try. In their 2021 interview, after gushing over the Woman's March that took place on the day after Trump's 2017 inauguration, mourning "the terrible downfall of Hillary Clinton," and expressing "admiration for Dr. Jill Biden" and "for Kamala Harris," they pretended to be grateful to the inane Queer Studies doyennes Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick for having "contributed enormously to the conversation that led to queer theory and that also resulted in trans studies." Yeah – you can take it to the bank that Gilbert and Gubar felt precisely the same way about the advent of Butler and Sedgwick as Hillary Clinton felt when Barack Obama came out of the woodwork and stole the Democratic presidential nomination from her.

Still Raging

The occasion of Gilbert and Gubar's 2021 interview, by the way, was the publication of their book *Still Mad: American Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination*. In it, they [explained](#) that they'd decided to write it "because we are still mad." That, they explained, is what feminism's all about: never-ending rage at the "patriarchal structures that have proven to be shockingly obdurate."

It was those structures that, in their view, had made possible the election of Trump, who they described as "boorish," "utterly unqualified," "misogynistic," "rabble-rousing," and "nearly psychotic" – as opposed, naturally, to the "educated and experienced" Hillary Clinton, who, they asserted, would, if elected, "surely not govern by tweet, not deny or evade the existence of a major medical threat, not foment rebellion among the citizens of her land or counsel people to ingest Lysol or enlist the military against civil rights protesters."

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Lies, lies, lies. But then again Gilbert and Gubar's entire project was founded on lies. These were, after all, a couple of incredibly privileged women posing as downtrodden – an insult to every one of the hundreds of millions of truly downtrodden people on earth – and posturing as warriors even as they luxuriated in cozy homes in college towns that would've made most people around the world weep with envy. They took the study of literature – which, properly understood, is an exercise in subtly and delicately teasing out the truth, beauty, and moral content in works of the human imagination – and turned it into a crude, cheap means of slamming men.

Well, in one sense, they won: the increasing toxicity of man-hatred in the academy, which began with professors like Gilbert and Gubar, has led more and more young men to give up entirely on the idea of higher education. But in another sense

they lost – for the revolution they initiated has reached a point of utter self-parody and sparked a magnificent backlash, the result of which is that the most venerable universities, like the most established media, are headed, along with the reality-defying ideologies that have captured them, for the chopping block. In the end, alas, that's the unenviable legacy of Sandra M. Gilbert and her sisters in arms.

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