State of the Art

Of Influences and Anxieties

Sandra Gilbert's Feminist Commitment

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ABSTRACT This is an interview with Professor Sandra Gilbert (University of North California at Davis), undoubtedly one of feminism's most prominent theorists. The interview was conducted in Ghent in the spring of 2000. Sandra Gilbert's name is most often used in conjunction with that of Professor Susan Gubar as the author of *The Madwoman in the Attic* and the trilogy *No Man's Land*. In the course of the interview Professor Gilbert talks about the hurdles she had to cross as a young woman academic, the choices she had to make as a mother, her successful collaboration with Susan Gubar and her current, quite controversial viewpoints concerning women's studies versus gender studies and essentialism.

KEY WORDS feminism ◆ literary criticism ◆ literary history ◆ literary theory

Sandra Gilbert is one of the stars in feminist literary history. She and Susan Gubar established themselves as formidable forces when they co-wrote *The Madwoman in the Attic*, published in 1979. Then followed the successful trilogy *No Man's Land* (1988, 1990, 1994) and the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*. Every self-respecting literary theorist is supposed to know their oeuvre before he or she can pronounce themselves on the recent history of literary criticism.

The *Madwoman* was very special in its time. It was a book written by two people yet achieving a homogeneity which one would assume impossible to reach and it was truly innovative in its 'woman-centred' approach of Anglo-American literature. The focus of feminist literary

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criticism had hitherto lain on the representation of women in canonical works of fiction, i.e. those mainly written by men, also known as 'images of women' critique. Thus, Kate Millet (1970) discussed and criticized the work of D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller and Norman Mailer in her groundbreaking *Sexual Politics*. Millet had picked these authors' works because they perfectly illustrated the way in which mainstream literature (written by men) confirms female and male stereotypes. Gilbert and Gubar, however, proposed to analyse literature written by women. Their starting point was Harold Bloom's theory of the 'anxiety of influence', which they proceeded to adapt to their own research material and their intentions. Bloom's theory is based on a patrilinear view of literary history. He claims that every author has to conquer his fear of being confronted and compared with his forefathers. Gilbert and Gubar now believed that women too had to overcome a fear, but, because of women's inferior social position in the 18th and 19th centuries, theirs was not the fear of not living up to expectations when compared to their predecessors but the fear of writing as such. Writing was considered to be a fundamentally male activity. The first sentence of the *Madwoman in the Attic* therefore fittingly reads: 'Is a pen a metaphorical penis?' The aim of this study was to (re)construct a female literary tradition from which it appeared that women's fantasy was different, that women constructed a gender-specific imagery and developed a dialogue with one another. The central metaphor of *Madwoman*, one made explicit in the title of the book, is the personification of the socially unacceptable in women as a monstrous presence in their fiction: Bertha Mason, Rochester's mad first wife, imprisoned in Thornfield Hall, is convincingly shown to reflect and echo Jane Eyre's suppressed rebelliousness.

Gilbert and Gubar's collaboration was continued successfully in their trilogy *No Man's Land*. Whereas *Madwoman* concentrated on 19th-century prose fiction by women (and to a lesser extent poetry), the *No Man's Land* trilogy aimed at mapping women writers' poetics in the 20th century. In these volumes they take issue with the claims of French poststructuralist theorists such as Hélène Cixous or Jacques Derrida in that they persist in seeing the author as a real, historical subject and in their search for and analysis of gendered experience in the form of texts.

Like many theorists in the 1980s, the collaborative duo participated in the so-called 'cultural turn' of the age: the later books display an increased interest in the sociohistorical and cultural context. Besides, unlike poststructuralist critics, Gilbert and Gubar continue to believe in the reality of the author and the historical moment. Their views on literature and their confident belief in the power of a women's poetics were forcefully and eloquently articulated in the influential *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (1985) of which a second, much revised edition appeared in 1996.

Sandra Gilbert is a poet too, perhaps a poet foremost. She still writes

and publishes poetry next to her academic publications. Her poetry, however, is less well-known in Europe. After the sudden death of her husband, Elliot Gilbert, in 1990, she changed course a little. She has expressed her grief and the feeling of powerlessness provoked by his unnecessary early death and the incompetence of the medical staff responsible for it, in a partly documentary, partly autobiographical prose memoir titled *Wrongful Death* (1995). More recently, her collected poetry has been published by Norton as *Kissing the Bread: New and Selected Poems, 1969–1999*. She has also just published an anthology, *Inventions of Farewell: A Book of Elegies*.

Sandra Gilbert has visited Europe on several occasions. Most recently she came to Paris and Sicily in search of her roots. It is during that trip that she visited us at Ghent and participated in a conference on 'Gender, Madness and Identity' as our plenary speaker. Her contribution was titled 'The Engendering of Elegy. I: the Widow'. On the eve of the conference, she kindly allowed us to talk to her about her life and her work.

MD and KH: What is your background (social, political, intellectual) and in which way(s) has it been formative for your later theoretical and critical concerns?

SG: It is important to know that I come from an immigrant family. My father was born in Paris and brought to the United States when he was a year old, in 1905 or 1906. He was born to a Russian mother who had for her part emigrated from Russia to Paris. She later came to the United States with her *Niçoise* husband whose family had emigrated from near Genoa to Nice and then to Paris. It is very hard to understand why this young family went to the US in the first place. I was told that my grandfather came to the US because he wanted to study art. Now to leave Paris in order to study art in New York is really like making a major mistake; that is sort of not getting it. If you know the movie *Casablanca* you will remember that somebody asks the Humphrey Bogart character why he went to Casablanca and he says: 'I went to take the waters' and they say 'but there are no waters in Casablanca' and the Bogart character says: 'I was misinformed'. That was my grandfather.

My mother's family was Sicilian. She was brought to the US when she was around seven. This is all very interesting and important for a person who is not just a poet but a literary critic because it means that the family is full of mysteries. Susan Gubar and I have talked about this frequently: a lot of the thematic material in the *Madwoman in the Attic* is about the narrative of unravelling mysteries, or of unfolded mysteries or of subtexts that you don't know about. Immigrant families in the US very often don't tell their secrets, even to their own children. The children, of course, are insulated from the secrets because they don't speak the native language of

their parents. I've stressed that my father's family was French-Italian and Russian and that my mother's family was Sicilian. My father and mother did not have any language in which to speak to each other except English. But they had these private secret languages that they spoke within their own families. In fact, I might have been one of those children, like some children of immigrant families I've heard about, who believed that every person had to grow up inventing her own language. In those cases, it's as if you reach a certain age when you say 'ok, now it's time to make up a language' because everybody in the family seemed to have a special, private language.

Another important part of my background is that I started writing poetry when I was four years old and was encouraged to do that by my Sicilian mother.

And finally there is the fact that I studied at Cornell University with M.H. Abrams who was a great historian of the 19th century, as you know, and who really encouraged his students to excavate all of their intellectual assumptions over and over again. He did that in his capacity as a historian of criticism more than as a historian of the 19th century. He made one see all kinds of connections between different literary periods, to the extent, that is, that one believes that there were 'periods' that one could see dissolving and evolving into another.

MD and KH: Was there any reason for these immigrant families to be so secretive?

SG: Well the immigrant families of my parents' generation wanted to start a new life in the US but it was terribly hard to be an immigrant in America at that time. My mother was really kind of ashamed of being an Italian and, you know, there is all this stuff about the Mafia that is particularly being connected with being Sicilian. But then within Sicilian culture itself there is a whole tradition of what in Mafia movies is called *omertà*, the silence, which is really true. There really was a silence within that part of the family. The secrets on the other side of my family, my father's side of my family, were there because a lot was left behind, a lot happened in the old world that simply didn't get translated into the life of the new world. My grandfather still had a very full, rich and complicated family in Nice. His relatives became like mythical figures to me; and as for my grandmother, she left Russia when she was 12, so I knew almost nothing about her life. My grandmother did not know who her father was but then she said that she thought he was a cossack. This is a story that American immigrants could tell you over and over again. The story of the erasure of the past. I think that as an influence on my interest in history it is at least as important as the influence of M.H. Abrams.

MD and KH: Looking back, how would you briefly characterize your work to an audience not familiar with it? Which part of it would you claim is the most important contribution to the contemporary critical debate?

SG: Personally I believe that all work around gender is cultural, political and theoretical, so therefore all the work that Susan and I have done together on gender would be part, I hope, of a kind of general contribution to cultural, political, theoretical ideas about the construction of persons as male or female. I am sure that is the most visible part of any contribution that I have made to the contemporary critical debate. I'd like to think that there are other contributions too but that would be the obvious answer.

MD and KH: According to our sources, you started your career in the early 1970s. Your first publication was a monograph on D.H. Lawrence's poetry. Lawrence (after what someone like Kate Millet had written about him) is not exactly an icon of the feminist movement. What was it that set you to study his work? Why and how did you afterwards turn to women writers, writers of the 19th century first, Lawrence's contemporaries later? Was it Lawrence's poetry that set it all off?

SG: I started studying Lawrence's poetry in a rather opportunistic way. I had been planning to do a dissertation on romanticism and the poetry of Wallace Stevens. In fact at the moment when I came to take my orals I sort of sprang my new idea of writing a dissertation about Lawrence on the man who was going to be my dissertation director at Columbia. He was very alarmed because he was quite unprepared to question me about D.H. Lawrence so he said he was still going to question me about Stevens which he proceeded to do. This was very unnerving since I was not prepared to answer questions about Stevens. Oh well, there's a long and rather amusing history of misunderstandings in my life. But anyway it was opportunistic because I realized that so much stuff had been done on Stevens in the mid-1960s, when I was beginning to do this work, whereas very little had been done on Lawrence as a poet, although of course a great deal had already been written about his novels. Also, Lawrence's collected poems had just been published by Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts in 1964.

I think, however, that my interest in Lawrence rapidly escalated from an opportunistic interest to a real fascination with him. He is a figure I am still fascinated with, still deeply admire, despite the fact that he is so politically incorrect, as the saying goes. That is – although I wasn't quite aware of it at the time – Lawrence appealed to me because he was very revolutionary: he incarnated in one sense the connection between

romanticism and modernism, very clearly and plainly in a way that was quite interesting. At the same, he also incarnated what was in the 1960s a different kind of political incorrectness. Specifically, in an era when New Criticism was the prevailing theoretical approach to everything, Lawrence didn't fit any New Critical models.

You really had to question all the assumptions of the New Criticism – about what a poem is, how you read a poem, how you discuss a poem, how you analyse it, what makes it successful – if you were going to write about Lawrence. And in fact the most hegemonic New Critics, like Richard Blackmur, had written very nastily about Lawrence, as had T.S. Eliot. So I began to feel that it was a very defiant and revolutionary gesture on my part to be really – as Lawrence himself would put it – in the thick of this scrimmage. I felt as if I was really fighting a good fight by attacking all of these retrograde New Critics. Remember too, that at that time feminists, deconstructionists and cultural critics hadn't discovered that the New Critics ought to be attacked. They hadn't yet thought of that. So, for me it was scary and it was actually dangerous. In my first job somebody said: 'well, the fact that she is writing about D.H. Lawrence means that she can't be a very worthwhile scholar'. And in fact I actually was fired from that position! So in a sense working on Lawrence was a very revolutionary and rebellious gesture!

Ironically, Kate Millet was also at Columbia when I was a graduate student. Indeed, she was writing a dissertation that turned into the highly influential feminist text called *Sexual Politics*. But I didn't know Millet because Columbia was a very alienating place, and I knew very few of my fellow graduate students. In any case, I had three little kids, three under three-and-a-half. The 'angelic trio' we called them. So I just went to Columbia one day a week. The rest of the time I worked at home. I had no idea of what Millet was doing and probably would not have been interested. I remember that I had read Simone de Beauvoir at that point and I read Betty Friedan and they made me really sick. I can remember that I read Simone de Beauvoir when I was in college and I was shocked and horrified by her arguments about women in *The Second Sex*. I thought it was awful! I hadn't been brought up to think of myself as conventionally 'feminine'. In fact, I now see that, perhaps because I was an only child, my parents brought me up just the way they'd have brought up a boy. So nobody told me that because I was a girl I was supposed to act in a certain way, and therefore when I grew up I got quite sick at the thought of what I was reading (in Friedan and de Beauvoir) but I didn't see any reason why I should feel an obligation to write from a feminist perspective because I was a woman.

MD and KH: You are also a poet. Has your poetry influenced your scholarly writings? The language of your academic publications is very special,

very seductive too. One is led along a musical, repetitive language and many striking images and one imbibes the theories and interpretations along the way. Was this done consciously?

SG: Thank you, I hope so. I have always felt there is a certain reciprocity between what I write as a critic and what I do as a poet. I have certainly always felt that if anything is really important to me, I should write about it in every possible genre. So when I did have my feminist awakening, when the scales fell from my eyes on the way to the *Madwoman*, I didn't just write literary criticism, I also wrote a book of poems called *Emily's Bread*, which is really about the conditions of femininity and feminism.

MD and KH: When did the scales fall from your eyes?

SG: When Susan and I began to teach together in 1973.

MD and KH: There was no particular occasion or anything?

SG: Yes, there was an occasion. We team-taught a course in literature by women – and again just as my work on Lawrence was originally sort of opportunistic, the course I arranged to teach with Susan was something that just seemed like a practical and useful thing to do. As you may remember, I had lost my first teaching job because of, among other things, my work on D.H. Lawrence. This was the early 1970s and it was very difficult to find jobs in academia in the US. There was a slump in the academic job market and because I had three kids, I thought at first that I wouldn't look for a job anywhere except within the area where my husband was already teaching – the University of California, Davis. He was several years ahead of me; in fact he was already teaching at Columbia when I was a graduate student there. But I just couldn't get a job in the area so I did what felt at the time like a really radical thing: I looked for jobs outside California. Indeed, I looked for jobs everywhere in the US and soon I got a very good one in Indiana – which is 2000 miles from where my family and I were living. So we moved to Indiana for the year. Then Elliot went back to California and I was going to be alone for my second year and I was hoping that I would get a job at Davis the following year, as in fact I ultimately did.

At any rate, I didn't want to be separated from my family for a whole semester, much less a year, so my then colleague, Susan Gubar, volunteered to team-teach a special intensive eight-week class with me. This meant I could go back to California after eight weeks and then take a leave in the spring.

Susan and I were both interested in literature by women. I had been rereading *Jane Eyre* with my youngest daughter. But it wasn't our field:

Susan was a specialist in 18th-century literature. I was a specialist in modern British literature. Then, the chair of our department said: 'I really need a course about literature by women so would you please do that.' And we did.

We had a very funny time thinking about a name for the course; we were sitting in a pizza-parlour and we thought we had to give the course a snappy name to get the students in. I thought 'Upstairs-Downstairs' (then the title of a popular BBC television series) would be really snappy, but Susan scornfully pushed her pizza aside and said: 'Oh no, that's really vulgar.' So I tried again and this time I said 'How about the madwoman in the attic' because I was very interested in the figure of Bertha Mason Rochester in *Jane Eyre.* And that was what we called the course.

MD and KH: There are few scholars who became famous, who made it in the academic world as one half of a collaborating (alliterative) duo. You and your colleague Susan Gubar are always referred to as Gilbert and Gubar, sometimes people confuse the two of you, sometimes referring to you, for instance, as Susan Gilbert. Could you tell us the secret of such a successful collaboration?

SG: We team-taught the course I just described. We liked each other. We were both New Yorkers, hired the same year. We were both feeling quite alienated in the small mid-western college town of Bloomington, Indiana. We both came from immigrant families: hers was a Jewish family that had fled the holocaust in the 1930s and mine had come to the US earlier. But in any case, we both came from families that seemed to have a lot of secrets. And this last point is very relevant to any analysis of why we got interested in the things that we got interested in. And then it was very useful that we had different but mutually complementary professional backgrounds: Susan was working on figures of monstrous women in Gothic texts (on representations of women in Pope and Swift for example), I was thinking about *Jane Eyre* in particular but I had always been interested in the connections between romanticism and modernism. With me working, as it were 'backward' from the 20th century and Susan working her way forward from the 18th century, we met in the middle of the 19th century.

But to be frank, the way we initially planned the course was by simply compiling a list of all the books of women that we had heard of (and of course neither of us had studied women writers in college or graduate school because at that time there were no courses in such a subject). So we knew about Charlotte and Emily Brontë, of course, as well as Mary Shelley and Emily Dickinson. But we wanted to teach works by modern women too, so we added Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath. Then we learned about other writers; for instance, we heard there was an interesting American

writer called Kate Chopin, so we said: 'OK let's put her in.' This is truly what we did. Some key texts like the Y*ellow Wallpaper*, had in fact *just* been reprinted.

But the excitement really began for us when we started reading all these texts because we couldn't help noticing that when juxtaposed, for instance, in such works as *Frankenstein*, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Bell Jar* and *Mrs Dalloway*, there were many strikingly recurrent themes and images. And so, since we both have rather similar personalities, we'd be on the phone every night screaming 'Oh my God did you see that.' And finally, of course, we realized we had to write a book about what we experienced as a set of amazing discoveries.

MD and KH: Similar personalities would quarrel a lot?

SG: We've had our disputes.

MD and KH: Your books are very readable, written in a transparent style. Is this based on a conscious decision? In the last chapter of *No Man's Land* you talk about the 'occulting of common language'. Do you see such use of language as male posturing?

SG: I am afraid that some academic feminism has been as guilty of that lately as some highly theoretical male-authored criticism, and I regret it. I think there are many historical reasons for such a use of occulted language. Some of the reasons are discussed in the chapter on 'sexual linguistics' with which we end *The War of the Words*, Volume I of *No Man's Land*. There we talk about the ways in which male writers and thinkers have tried to distance themselves from the feminine by becoming increasingly difficult and obscure. But women, of course, try to keep up with the boys, right? So women often do this too. It is overdetermined.

But then there is another factor here, especially in the institutional structures in the US. On American campuses humanists have to compete for funds with scientists and if they can't show that they have a body of knowledge which requires just as much expertise as the sciences – in other words, if they can't certify themselves in a specialist vocabulary in the same way that scientists do – then they feel they will lose internal battles for funding And as it is we usually lose such battles, as you know, because of course, we humanists don't need all the hardware that most scientists need. It can cost more than 100,000 dollars to equip a lab for a scientist, whereas to set a humanist up in an office you need a computer – if that – and some pencils. So we've got to have something to prove that we are important.

Personally, I try very hard not to use obscure, specialized, theoretical language. There are two non-academic women who are very, very close to

me – my daughter Kathy and my mother – and I very much want to be able to write so that they can understand what I'm saying. My two other children are both academics so they could presumably decipher some of this awful jargon. But they don't like it either, nobody really likes it, and yet all too many academics can't stop themselves from using it.

MD and KH: In *The Madwoman in the Attic* you clearly use Harold Bloom's model of literary history as set out in his *Anxiety of Influence* and you refer to Edward Saïd. But of course you merely use Bloom as a starting point, adapting and changing his theory to your own use, helping you to define the anxieties of female writers. What were the main theoretical influences on your work?

SG: I think we felt that we were making up our own theories as we went along. We probably suffered from that because we can't be aligned with any particular theoretical or ideological school. We aren't really Marxist, we're just *sort of* psychoanalysts; so sometimes people must wonder what we *are* anyway.

Our use of Bloom is very interesting because if you speculate for a minute on the 'anxiety of influence' you realize that it is at least in part a model of the transmission of ideas from one generation to another, and that whole question of how ideas dissolve and evolve generationally and from period to period and from person to person is one that M.H. Abrams was interested in and taught us – or anyway taught *me* – to be interested in. But Bloom was also a devoted student of Abrams's and though I didn't encounter him in person, he and I eventually agreed that we were in some sense intellectual cousins because we were both collateral descendents of our intellectual 'uncle Mike'.

MD and KH: According to you, a female writer simply did not fit into the male literary history Bloom describes. She did not experience an anxiety of 'influence' but an anxiety of 'authorship'. Did you experience such an anxiety when you started to write as a poet / an academic?

SG: We don't claim that the woman writer knows what she is experiencing. I don't think I personally had a clear sense of either influence *or* anxiety. I started to write when I was four – not exactly a point when one is self-reflexive! But I had to admit that by the time I was a teenager I was very self-consciously reading and identifying with figures like Edna St Vincent Millais and Virginia Woolf, for sure. And I also know that when I got to college I felt a kind of revulsion against those lady-poets. I didn't want to be identified with them. I wanted to be Yeats or Humphrey Bogart! I didn't want to be what I'd begun to realize the world defined as a 'silly lady poet'! But then, later on, I discovered Sylvia Plath, who was

about five years ahead of me, and I was fascinated by her work – both compelled and competitive. That must have been the moment when I started very clearly, very painfully identifying myself as a woman.

I think that a lot of the theories Susan and I developed were tested on our own pulses, particularly on mine. As a poet I would always do a lot of introspecting: 'How did I feel about that', when I wrote it, and so forth.

MD and KH: Looking at the reception of your books it appears that you and your colleague have almost instantly been recognized as major contributors to the feminist literary history and feminist literary theory. But, as a result, you have also been subjected to some severe criticism. Toril Moi, for instance, in *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985) is troubled by your insistence on the identity of the author, your need to find the real truth underneath the surface of the text. She is wary of a theory which always wants to trace and always tends to find the author's female rage in the literary text. As a result, she says, your analysis of Jane Austen's work lacks the force of the analysis of Charlotte Brontë: 'Austen's gentle irony is lost on them, whereas the explicit rage and moodiness of Charlotte Brontë's texts furnish superb grounds for stimulating exegesis.' Now, apart from the fact that Moi has overlooked your reference, early on in *Madwoman*, to Austen's irony, we were wondering whether there is indeed this drive to analyse a text with a view to finding an indignation which all women supposedly share? We realize that you have answered much of that criticism in the later volumes of *No Man's Land*. Has this satisfied you?

SG: We have always hoped that our work got richer and more sophisticated as we went along and it certainly has to be remembered about *The Madwoman* that it was written at a time when there was almost nothing in the way of theory to refer to. I mean what we referred to was what there was to refer to. We read everything that there was to read. Nevertheless, it's also true that we weren't interested in too much complex theory, though we did actually use a little bit of stuff from Derrida. We did use Saïd, we did deal with Bloom. We were not and, I must say, we are not quite Marxists. We were making up a lot of the stuff as we went along. That said, I still think when I go back and read those chapters, that they are 'true', whatever true may mean. I think that, as it were, the 'story' we told is a valid story that can be told about women writers in the 19th century. I don't believe that we ever claimed that there weren't a lot of other narratives that could be produced but the narrative underlying *The Madwoman* still seems to be quite a legitimate account of the woman writer and the 19th-century literary imagination.

I can go a little further and say that I think if you set the narrative produced in the *Madwoman* against the kinds of propositions that are put

forth by some of the French feminists, then there is no serious female historical context in the story that for example Hélène Cixous has to tell, there is just some kind of enraged, maddened person who never produces any literature. Woman is completely silent, you know, in that account. So how could that account be substituted for an account that at least takes into consideration the existence of Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë?

MD and KH: In the third volume of *No Man's Land* you and Susan Gubar feel the need to respond to the criticism levelled at your writings by those postmodernist theorists who posit a 'polyvocality' inevitably leading to the disappearance of woman in a phallocentric discourse. As a result you seem to opt (with Gayatri Spivak) for a 'strategic essentialism' – a provisional assumption that there are men, women and meanings in history. Yet, what we and others react against when we reject 'essentialism' is a position which reduces women to 'woman', turning the endless variety of female human beings into one, biologically defined and determined species. Do you think our view and our definition of the term naïve or simplistic and do you have another definition of essentialism?

SG: I think that the fact that Austen has her ironic strategies as compared to the more volcanic strategies of say Charlotte Brontë suggests that even in the *Madwoman* there is no monolithic woman. To use the term 'woman writer' is just the most ordinary kind of way to talk about the various practices of women who write. It seems to me that as literary critics we shouldn't be so anti-essentialist that we can never use an easy economic phrase like 'the woman writer' when we want to discuss the ways in which, for example, some women writers formulate their ideas one way, others another way, and so forth. Of course we don't want to argue that there is only one monolithic species of woman writer and of course we don't want women to be biologically reduced to *the* biological woman who is X, Y or Z.

One of the problems with the whole anti-essentialist movement now is that it tends to eradicate commonalities among women. For instance, I just recently spent a month in India and I do feel that despite cultural and geographic and economic differences I have more in common with a lot of the women in India than I do with a lot of men in my own country. I think that as women we do share a common kind of subordination, cross-culturally, that is not the same as the kind of cultural outsiderhood I might share with, let's say, my Italian-American male colleagues. I know the Italian-American men and I have a lot in common because we have in common the sort of Italian immigrant stories that I talked about earlier but I believe – this is a very passionate belief – that all the writing connections that I have with my female friends in India are probably stronger than the ones I have with Italian-American men in California. And I

suppose this belief probably makes me more a kind of psychoanalytical critic than a Marxist critic. I really do think that 'family-configuration' is cross-culturally determined in certain ways by the fact that women bear children and men don't.

Three of us here are mothers, as we've discussed, and that biological fact has certain psychological consequences associated with configurations of the family that are produced cross-culturally but in general so arranged as to bring children up with distinctive feelings about being male or female. I share a lot of this thinking with somebody like Nancy Chodorow. And I feel much more confident in making intellectual assertions based on such basically psychoanalytical assumptions about the construction of human beings than I would in arguing that we are different persons because we have different material conditions. I say this despite the fact that I honour the diversity among women. At any rate, I also fear that from a feminist perspective too much emphasis on diversity is ultimately counterproductive. Indeed, in America I think stressing *divisions* among women has been politically quite problematic for the women's movement.

I think the important thing for feminists to hold on to is that we women have deep commonalities with other women no matter what their colour, their class, their sexual orientation. We have so much more in common with each other. That's not to elide all the other affinities and affiliations we have with people in different classes, cultural positions, positions of sexual orientation and so on.

MD and KH: Wilde's saying that great art is not necessarily morally acceptable art becomes in your work: 'great art is not necessarily politically correct but it should at least reflect complex cultural dynamics'. But can you write about sexual anxieties and hostilities (the gender dynamics in literary texts) without pronouncing (a moral?) judgement?

SG: Obviously, there is something very painful about art that is anti-Semitic, or misogynist or racist. It is very painful to read certain texts. I do think that some of them just can be so bad that I don't think they can be great. I think that the most vicious, anti-Semitic passages in T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound cannot be great because they are too awful. It just makes you feel too yukky. How can you feel dirty about greatness? On the other hand, I think that there are works of art that reflect terrible sexual anxieties or social anxieties or cultural pain and that might be upsetting or disturbing but that also might be really great, and great precisely because they reflect significant cultural anxieties.

MD and KH: May we go back to the centuries preceding the 19th century? In your introduction to *The Norton Anthology* you write that

'Mary's grace sanctifies all women, even an ostensibly fallen one such as Christ's disciple the reformed prostitute Mary Magdalene.' In spite of the fact that this positive remark is immediately countered in the following paragraphs, we were wondering whether you thought the impact of Christianity on the position of women with an intellectual potential, was, at least in the beginning, a beneficial one. We were thinking more specifically about the introduction of monasticism and the advocacy of virginity and celibacy which opened new possibilities for women, since it gave some of them the opportunity to read and write. Could you comment on this?

SG: I am no expert but I think there can be no question that women in the Middle Ages who were given the kinds of opportunities that we still see in Flemish *béguinages* or that women who entered into convents were extraordinarily privileged; that they were having opportunities that few other women had except for certain aristocratic women who could be patrons of the arts. I think this would be true through the Renaissance but one would have to say that the patronage of the church was in many ways a mixed blessing, or to switch metaphors a double-edged sword. On the one hand: yes the convent gives you all these opportunities to study and to read and to be free of sexual harassment; but on the other hand: you are locked up in a convent. If you think of a controversially mythic though real person like Héloïse. You have to decide that alas, she was locked up in a convent, poor Héloïse, but also, hurray, she was locked in a convent, lucky Héloïse. Women find ways of subverting their bondage, you know.

Like the slaves in the American South for example, women throughout history have taken every possible opportunity, even in the midst of suffering. Slaves, after all, developed all kinds of subversive escaping at least spiritually from the horror of their imprisonment and enslavement, although nonetheless they *were still slaves*.

One of the things that feminists try to do is go back in the past and find positive examples of how women showed great fortitude, achieved great things. Conceding that woman has always been in some sense a victim, many feminists try to repudiate the woman-as-victim-theory by saying: 'Oh but these are really positive role-models, they were real mystics and great abbesses and they ruled convents.' Okay, that's true but it still wasn't great.

Virginia Woolf at least made this sort of point over and over throughout *A Room of One's Own*: on the one hand, aristocratic women ruled great estates when their husbands were absent – and often even had significant psychological power over their husbands – but on the other hand, women still didn't have any social rights and they still could be flung into the convent by somebody else, it wasn't necessarily a voluntary decision. It wasn't a voluntary servitude. At least not always.

Having so recently returned from India I have to come back to my Indian references. One of the things that some cultural historians say about India is that *satee* (a widow being burned alive on the funeral pyre of her husband) is right because that is what the women want to do. It is a heroic act and who are you, as a western imperialist, to come along and tell us that there is something wrong. This is analogous.

MD and KH: Have you been able to distinguish those 'female' themes and metaphors (disease, madness, confinement, imprisonment) which according to you marked the literature written by women in the 19th and 20th centuries, in texts written by women after the second wave of feminism (i.e. post-1970s), after the publication of works in the tradition of your own? If yes, does that seem to indicate some kind of a female tradition? If no, does this imply cultural context is of prime importance? And have you been able to examine these themes across cultural or ethnic boundaries?

SG: I think that work written after the second wave of feminism has changed a great deal because I think the situation of women has changed very radically. I think the fact that we are sitting here right now, talking about this shows that. The fact that I can travel around the world giving lectures at a range of universities – things one could simply not have done 20 not to mention 100 years ago or 50 years ago –suggests that we are in a whole new kind of situation as far as women are concerned. But as to the future situation of women, I can't really answer: Susan and I are not prophets, we are cultural, literary and psychoanalytic historians.

I do think though that women authors are still dealing with uncertainty and sexual identity and I think these themes are still very much part of female literary tradition, perhaps in part precisely because women affiliate with traditions in which such themes are central. After all women do still identify with their female predecessors.

MD and KH: Is there an evolution towards misandry perhaps?

SG: I suppose there is some, sure. I mean, we tend to call that separatism, right? I mean I guess there's some misandry though perhaps not as much as you might imagine considering what women have had to put up with.

MD and KH: Now that many literary critics problematize the male gender as well we were wondering whether you would consider returning to Lawrence and his poetry (as you have done to some extent in the last book of *No Man's Land*) to write a monograph on his writings with the latest theoretical developments in mind.

SG: I find this development very unnerving. From a certain point of view it is perfectly true that masculinity is as much a construct as femininity, so why shouldn't we have masculinity studies along with femininity studies. This means that people who study gender should all be in the same field. But when a colleague of mine decided that she wanted to change women's studies into gender studies and then to change gender studies to cultural studies, I began to feel we were moving backward in time. So guess what, women have now really been left so far behind that we are back there in 1848 in Seneca Falls or something. That's quite amazing. Gender is then just another aspect of culture, just the way femininity is an aspect of the subject of gender which, of course, includes masculinity. Nevertheless, even though in one sense such a move is politically problematic for a feminist, in another sense, it does call people's attention to the fact that masculinity is as much an artifice and a construct as femininity. That's important. I mean there is no way in which the default position of the human being is male. Gay studies too falls into the gender studies. Queer theory is the biggest thing in gender studies. That's the good thing about it – but then when both get assimilated into cultural studies they tend to blur and dissolve away.

It's a real dilemma: what you lose politically by giving up the phrase 'women's studies', you gain politically by calling attention to the constructed nature of masculinity. I have never fought the impulse to change 'women's studies' to gender studies but at the same time I'd never give up for example *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*. We are often asked: 'Do you want that anthology to self-destruct, do you want it to be mainstreamed?' My answer is 'No', because I think a female literary tradition is like an American literary tradition, like an Italian-American literary tradition, like a postcolonial Indian literary tradition, – which is to say all are significantly different literary traditions that need to be studied. So I certainly don't want an anthology of literature by women to self-destruct. I don't mind if women's studies evolve into gender studies but I don't mind if we study literature by men either!

So will I go back to D.H. Lawrence? Indeed and I have and I do. Right now I really talk about Lawrence more since I am actually doing very much with gender studies at the moment. Rather, I seem to be working in a field that might be called 'death studies' and since I'm working in death studies I am really examining Lawrence's poetry of mourning, his visions of the afterlife and so forth in relation to general issues of separation, loss, and grief.

MD and KH: After the untimely death of your husband Elliot Gilbert you wrote a semi-documentary, semi-(auto)biographical book, *Wrongful Death*, reporting on his death and the aftermath of his death. Your conference paper deals with 'the engendering of elegies' from the point of

view of the widow. Did your husband's death set you on a new course of research. Is this the subject of a new book?

SG: My life was of course completely transformed by my husband's death. He died following routine surgery at a modern medical centre. I never saw him again after we said goodbye to him the morning that he went into the hospital, and to this day his physicians haven't explained to us exactly what caused his death. Nevertheless, we know because we filed a lawsuit and with the aid of a physician friend we studied the hospital records. And I wrote recounting the story because I felt my husband would want me to do it. I felt a moral responsibility to tell his story.

People often ask me if writing *Wrongful Death* was cathartic. I suppose it was but I think that's because I truly felt a deep moral obligation to tell this story, on behalf of my husband.

After a while, though, it was pretty obvious that I had become an elegist. And eventually, when I was asked to give a rather important lecture on my own campus, Susan said to me: 'Well, you can write all these elegies so maybe that's what you'd want to talk about.' And I realized that, yes, I should begin to think about the poetry of mourning for a whole range of reasons. And that was the beginning of the book on which I'm currently at work.

Really, I was utterly transformed by the death of my husband, it was the kind of thing where you are disintegrated and destroyed and reconstructed from the ground up but of course my decision to write about that locates me as part of a critical movement (in the States at least) that has inspired a number of theorists to become autobiographical and memoiristic. So I am not all that original. But you know Yeats said – this is a line of which my husband was very fond – there are only really two great subjects in life: 'sex and death'. I figure I spent the first part of my career talking about sex so I might as well start talking about the second half of the equation.

MD and KH: That is more or less what John Donne did as well.

SG: Yes, except that I hope that I don't have to sleep in a coffin.

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