

Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle*, London and New York: Viking, 1990, 256 pp.

With *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle*, Elaine Showalter combines an amazing knowledge of late nineteenth-century culture with the more recent interest she has taken in contemporary issues. The result is a highly accomplished analysis of the themes, images and metaphors dominating *fin-de-siecle* cultural productions, and its representations in British and American art, literature and film. As Showalter tells us, the book focuses primarily on texts and myths: “the single woman, the New Woman, the battle between literary kings and queens, sexual surgery and sexual epidemics, decadence and apocalypse.” Moving back and forth between historical narrative and textual analysis, Professor Showalter illuminates these two periods of transition, drawing fascinating comparisons that range from Conrad to Coppola; from the trials of Oscar Wilde to the politics of the Gay Rights movement; from Jack the Ripper to the well-publicized sex crimes in the 1980s; from the terrors of blurred sexual boundaries in *Dracula* to postmodern vampire films; from the nineteenth-century femme fatale to *Fatal Attraction*; from Syphilis to AIDS epidemics.

Showalter makes ample use of previous pathbreaking studies but her own work differs in scope because of its comparative approach and her presentation of gender as a category affecting both sexes and not just women. This approach is but a logic consequence of her scholarly career in which she has shifted from “gynocritics” (a term she labelled in literary criticism) to the dialogical approach she has adopted in her later contributions.

Precisely, some of the most provocative aspects of the book are those dealing with the crisis of “masculine” and “feminine” identities at the end of the Victorian era. The emergence of feminism, the sense of “sexual anarchy” and the subsequent reinforcement of strict gender behavior, Showalter argues, generated many anxieties and contradictions on both sides, creating an atmosphere of antagonism that was not only a battle between the sexes, as many critics have pointed out, but also within the sexes. The recurrent theme of split personalities and its connections with homosexuality recurrent in so many *fin-de-siecle* manifestations (*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, to quote but a few) are analyzed here as a camouflaged way of dealing with inner conflicts and desires in the face of a repressive culture. The theme of the divided self is also explored in relation to women in both centuries, from the famous cases of Miss Beauchamp and B.C.A. in the 1890s., to contemporary revisions, like Emma Tennant’s novel, *The Strange Case of Ms. Jekyll and Ms. Hyde*, and David Lynch’s successful film, *Blue Velvet*.

In a language of remarkable clarity and precision Showalter traces the multifaceted images of sexual confusion, like the inscription of homosexuality in *Dracula*, the gender masquerades of Wilde's plays (the *Wild*, *Wild Thing*) and the theatrical transvestism in Lindsay Kemp's contemporary performance. In this vein, one of the most fascinating themes is that of the veiled woman, which in her view is a metaphor for confinement and also an extremely permeable image, suggesting access to another sphere, another sexuality, another self. According to Elaine Showalter, "there is always a veiled man hiding in fin-de-siecle stories about the veiled woman." She/he reflects the ambiguity and transparency of sexual difference and the sense of guilt and decadence of the period. A paradigmatic case is Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, which she illuminates with an insightful interpretation of the pictures of Beardsley. Both artists, she says, participate in a devastating attack on patriarchy while recoiling with horror from the implications of an uncontrolled female energy. Far from being irrelevant to Wilde's intentions, as many critics have argued, Showalter sustains that Beardsley's drawings comprise a coded sub-text central to the play, especially in its homoerotic elements. The dance that Showalter sees in both texts is the dance of the gender, "the delicacy and permeability of the veil separating masculine from feminine, licit from illicit desire."

The book could have been perhaps even more complete if it had included a deeper analysis of some twentieth-century issues, like the complex thematic of cross-dressing in contemporary art and literature. Nevertheless, *Sexual Anarchy* successfully demonstrates its central thesis: the parallels between both fin-de-siecles, and their surrounding myths of anarchy, corruption and sense of an ending. In the era post-Chernobil, when we face so many signs of collapse, decay and exhaustion, Elaine Showalter finds resources for hope. As she said in a recent panel held at Princeton University, "after the end of history comes more history" and after all, the fin de siecle is but another fiction in which we invent ourselves, only more weighted with symbolic meaning because we invest it with the metaphors of death and rebirth characteristic of the end of a century. Ends are also beginnings and this book provides ample ground for rethinking our deepest humanitarian responses.

Notes

¹ See, for instance, Elaine Showalter, ed., *Speaking of Gender* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

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