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Gill Frith

Outside the Pale: Cultural Exclusion. Gender Difference and the Victorian Woman Writer by Elsie B. Michie (Cornell University Press, 1993)

Why does Dorothea fall apart at the sight of Rome? Elsie B. Michie's answer to this question is that the Rome scenes in *Middlemarch* stage a drama of female cultural exclusion. Dorothea's distressed response to the ruined 'city of visible history' represents the female spectator's confrontation with a concept of cultural 'wholeness' that implicitly excludes her. To explore this drama, and place it historically, Michie makes a series of imaginative and illuminating connections which are characteristic of her method in this book. She examines Freud's account of a parallel dream, in which he desperately wanted to go to Rome, but feared that something would block or prevent his entry into the city. Freud's fear focused upon Michelangelo's statue of Moses, a figure which encapsulated the classical culture, patriarchal inheritance and Jewish heritage from which Freud felt excluded. But for Freud, confusion and doubt were followed by a return of the power to interpret: he was able to pull together the fragments of the scene into a single comprehensive reading. For Dorothea, Michie argues, such 'masculine comprehensiveness' is not available. She is excluded from the 'high' culture which Rome represents because, as a Victorian woman, she is biologically too 'broken' to participate in it. But, in a deft display of detective work, Michie shows how Eliot invokes images from *Little Dorrit* and *Jane Eyre* to resist the definition of woman as a fragmented being, incapacitated by menstruation and child-bearing. In *Middlemarch* it is not the female spectator but the city which she sees that is blood-red and broken: 'Eliot represents culture itself not as a seamless whole but as a heterogeneous construct made up of a myriad pieces'.

This quotation usefully serves to define Michie's own approach in this ambitious and wide-ranging study. She takes her cue from Cora Kaplan's influential essay, 'Pandora's Box' (in *Sea Changes*, 1986) in which Kaplan argues for a mode of analysis which will not compartmentalize the question of gender, but will identify the ways in which gender, race and class 'work' together in the literary text. Michie focuses upon five nineteenth-century women writers: Mary Shelley, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot. In each case Michie demonstrates the models of sexual difference which position the woman writer 'outside' culture, but she is equally concerned to show how those models interconnect with other discursive structures - political, economic or colonial - which have, apparently, nothing to do with gender. In the case of Mary Shelley, Michie identifies close parallels between *Frankenstein* and Marx's writings on alienation and the fetishization of commodities. Marx argues that the product of labour only has value as a commodity if its visible, material or produced nature is repressed or denied; Shelley's monster is monstrous because its manufactured, material nature is relentlessly visible, repulsive because the things that 'make it work' are overtly displayed rather than concealed. Michie goes on to argue that Shelley's novel challenges the Romantic validation of abstract creativity over materiality and production. In a fascinating decoding of the 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein*, Michie shows that Shelley consistently refers to her novel as a 'production' rather than a 'creation', and introduces a chain of terms which link

industry and production with the process of reproduction. Michie's argument is that Shelley is positioned outside the Romantic system of inspiration because she, as a woman, is associated with the palpable, material world. In the 1831 introduction, she devises a new, femino-centric, theory of literary production which defines the imagination as *material*, as creation out of substance as opposed to creation out of abstraction.

Michie's chapter on the Brontë sisters identifies a different form of cultural exclusion. Her focus here is on the popular Victorian fantasy of the 'self-made man': while Patrick Brontë was able to *live* it, his daughters could only enter the masculine narrative of self-making in their fiction. Michie argues that the form taken by that narrative in *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* is underpinned by another Victorian fantasy: that social inequities which seemed intractable at home might be redressable in the wonderful world of the empire abroad. She concentrates on eliciting the imperialist sub-text which lies behind the representation of Heathcliff and Rochester, and draws extensively on Victorian ethnography, to argue that when Heathcliff and Rochester are 'down', they are associated with mid-nineteenth-century stereotypes of 'the Irish' as volatile, savage, dark and 'simianized' in appearance. But the traces of Irishness are covered over by more exotic references which move the narratives safely away from home: when Heathcliff and Rochester are 'up', they are characterized as oriental despots.

This is fascinating stuff, but I would buy Michie's book simply for her chapter on the professional interaction between Gaskell and Dickens. Michie argues that the Victorian split between the 'public' and the 'private' woman placed Gaskell, as a professional writer, in a position analogous to that of the prostitute, 'improperly' out on the streets. This may seem a startling assertion, but Michie locates it within Victorian debates about the control of prostitution, and, more specifically, within the differing views about the treatment of the 'fallen women' with whom both Gaskell and Dickens were actively concerned. Dickens was for penitence and emigration; Gaskell for reabsorption within the Victorian domestic sphere. Michie explores the impact of this difference on their fiction, but she also shows how the idea of the 'fallen woman' entered into their professional relationship. At Urania Cottage, the home which Dickens founded with Angela Burdett Coutts, the women were 'reformed' through a regime of discipline and surveillance which included telling their life-stories to the all-male cottage directors, including Dickens himself. As Michie shows, Gaskell's editorial dealings with Dickens also placed her in the position of a woman compelled to produce stories for a figure of masculine authority. Playfully addressing her as 'Dear Scheherazade', Dickens paid her well for her contributions to *Household Words*, but his munificence was double-edged; she was constantly having to tell more stories to pay off her debt to the journal. But as Michie shows in a final neat twist, Dickens himself was not invulnerable. In a posthumous review of Dickens's work, G.H. Lewes systematically placed Dickens as a 'feminine' writer who associated with 'scarlet women' and appealed to a 'low' audience.

Inevitably, a book which casts its net so widely leaves the reader with questions. I was puzzled by Michie's choice of texts in the Brontë chapter: the idea of the 'self-made man' seems to demand discussion of *The Professor* (and what about Lucy Snowe, that thor-

oughly self-made woman?). But the richness of Michie's material, and the dexterity with which she holds together the multiple strands of her argument, make such criticisms seem begrudging. Michie speaks most directly to a readership familiar with literary theory and feminist scholarship, but although her material is weighty, her style is lucid and readable. Anyone with a serious interest in nineteenth-century fiction will want to read this book for its insights into Victorian literary relations. Any George Eliot specialist, it goes without saying, will want to know what happened to Dorothea in Rome.