

BOOK REVIEWS



Jansen, Sharon L. *Reading Women's Worlds from Christine de Pizan to Doris Lessing: A Guide to Six Centuries of Women Writers Imagining Rooms of Their Own*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Pp. 254. ISBN: 9780230110663 (PB); 9780230342880 (HB); 9780230118812 (PDF); 9780230342880 (EPUB).

In this compendium, Jansen presents “a book about books, a guide that explores a dream landscape” (ix) created by generations of female authors who have designed rooms, gardens, or entire societies that “offer a refuge for women who wish to withdraw from a world dominated by men” (101). This shared desire manifests not as a passive need for escape but rather, Jansen argues, as an “active withdrawal from a [hostile] reality,” a private “liberation” in which each seeker can find “her own reality, her own freedom” (2), either in female company or alone. Looming behind the fantasy is an “ever-present shadow world”; each dream poses the danger of becoming “a nightmare reality” (6) in which enclosure can also mean victimization, suffocation, helplessness, and abuse. Jansen looks back over six centuries and sees “these imagined worlds not as a series of isolated, individual dreams but as one continuous—or, perhaps, recurring dream” (5)—language that reveals not just the book’s approach, a search for thematic connections that conflates substantially different time periods and cultural differences, but also casts the female search for architectural separation as a tenuous, perhaps ultimately unrealizable quest undertaken in avoidance of patriarchal oppression and inflexible beliefs that make the spaces designed for women by men inhospitable.

As rich and informative as the book is, it also leaves much in the margins. Jansen never confronts the subtle essentializing of “woman” that occurs with identifying shared “women’s worlds” over the vastly disparate time periods and cultures she covers, from late-medieval France to modern Iran. She delicately sidesteps the question of whether imagining all-female societies as an antidote doesn’t ultimately rely on the same stereotypes generated by the surface world,

presuming, for example, that women in their natural state are relational, nurturing, peaceful, and verbose. Jansen provides excellent historical context; she is gifted at distilling long traditions, as proved in her overview on proverbial misogyny from Ovid and Juvenal to Shakespeare (43-46), her brief history of female anger (129-30), or her explanation of Aristotle's conception of women as deformed males (111). But she doesn't take the opportunity provided by her broad knowledge to outline any historical or figurative evolution in these worlds she discovers, which visibly progress from the kinds of physical seclusion recommended by Mary Astell's *Serious Proposal to the Ladies* and parodied by Margaret Cavendish in *The Convent of Pleasure* to the spiritual, intellectual, or metaphysical places conjured in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Slavenka Drakulić's *S: A Novel about the Balkans*, in which the enclosure turns from a sanctuary to a prison and then into a locus of agency, with each protagonist reclaiming the figurative "room" as Virginia Woolf defined it, "the power to think for oneself" (4).

Jansen's purpose is not to challenge her texts with hard analysis or critical interpretation but simply to "put these women dreamers and their texts in conversation with one another," tender her "own observations and the reactions and reflections of [her] students," "introduce . . . readers to new titles," and "help them to read their old favorites in new ways" (8). The result is an extended meditation in which various interesting observations float free, buoyed by Jansen's historical and biographical excavations. Though the methodology is strictly comparative, the different voices converge on several points, particularly the need for women's history, women's stories, and models of other worthy women—thinking back through our mothers, as Woolf says (96), a form of education for which Astell suggests women are the best instructors (151). In this shared dream space, the most important, rewarding, and intimate relationships women have are with other women (91, 151). The worlds revealed in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* and Doris Lessing's *The Cleft* are free of violence only so long as they are free from men and male influence; self-designed, all-female sanctuaries are fragile communities that men have the power to infiltrate and destroy (even if humorously, as in Marjane Satrapi's *Embroideries*). Aside from remarking on echoes of Astell in Woolf, however, Jansen spends little time exploring how later authors have reworked, built upon, or reimagined the spaces designed by their foremothers, nor does she investigate the provocative question of why, after six centuries, women are still longing, in substantially the same ways, for private, uninterrupted, self-designed space.

Instead, the book's quest for "an alternative story" or "quintessential female

narrative” (41) leads—as the chronological and often cultural distance of the paired texts necessitates—to broadly thematic, safely tentative, and sometimes hugely reductionist conclusions. Christine de Pizan and Woolf are both “audacious” and “share a passionate defense” in “their articulation of the disadvantages and obstacles that women face” (34); Moderata Fonte in *The Worth of Women* “is able to explore traditional views of woman’s nature and status” (62). Eventually, almost inevitably, the ultimate woman’s world is revealed to be the body itself, for which reason proprietorship of that body has always been in contention, as illustrated in the chapter examining Arcangela Tarabotti’s *Paternal Tyranny* alongside Valerie Solanas’s *SCUM Manifesto*. In this respect as elsewhere Jansen resists taking up a debate but simply gestures toward “the hard truth that ‘a woman’s body never really belongs to the woman. It belongs to others—to the man, the children, the family’” (quoting Drakulić on 201). Though the seasoned scholar might wish the book to press for a tougher interrogation of some of its premises or offer a theoretically grounded argument, the general reader or undergraduate—for whom, it most often seems, the book is truly intended—might well find the broad and often inarguable conclusions an energizing revelation.

The pedagogical origins of the project leave their residue, with many of the chapters unfolding like an exercise in close reading, illuminated with plot summary, genre criticism, formalistic study, reception histories, and reader response. Very often, where some analysis seems almost demanded, Jansen hands things over to her students, conveying their personal responses to or speculations about a text. This approach might well be a function of her feminist pedagogy; rather than assuming any authority of interpretation, she instead—in the tradition of the best guides—presents the material, points out features of interest, and allows the reader to do the rest. Much like the imagined string of dreamers she conjures in the beginning, Jansen crafts a series of lucid and lovingly described portraits that form an artful collection but do not, in the end—unlike Christine’s *City of Ladies*—become something greater and more symbolically powerful. Rather, keeping her tone modest and personal, Jansen concludes with a gentle exhortation to the reader to keep questing for her own room, “your best hope for salvation” and “the freedom to dream” (221).

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