Review of "The Witches of Eastwick" by Nina Baym

Nina Baym

Follow this and additional works at: http://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Review · Nina Baym


Witchcraft in John Updike’s new novel is only a gimmick, and it fails to give the book spirit or edge. Cartoon characters inhabit a meager plot which is slowed by overwrought nature descriptions and deadened by Updike’s obsessive, joyless, pornography. This much-touted foray into feminine awareness by a male author notoriously unsympathetic to women is badly marred; if it is a good-faith effort (which of course it may not be), then Updike shows himself incapable of transcending his sense that women are no more than their bodies, and that these bodies are real only if they are seen and used by men. Which is to say that, in truth, women do not exist. Set in 1970, the only question that The Witches of Eastwick proposes for women is: are they more real when seen by one man or by many? The answer is, one; preferably a husband.

It is also better for society when women are parcellled out to husbands rather than allowed to run loose. In The Witches of Eastwick divorced women are nothing but trouble for themselves and other women: in a word, witches. The book shows that no women are “good” in any moral sense, they are only good for something; and what they are good for is going to bed with any and all men, which they will do if not married, thereby creating anger and jealousy among themselves. Hence, marriage as an institution serves to keep women from killing each other. Luckily for women and society, men are lustful and will marry, and hence the peace of society, though always at risk, is always finally assured. Nothing is lost but men’s souls, sacrificed to their lust. Married or not, then, women are always trouble for men, which opinion justifies Updike’s taking petty revenge on them through futile rhetorical assault. Whether Updike believes his own nonsense one cannot tell simply from The Witches of Eastwick itself, but it is consistent with his other writing, including his literary criticism.

It would be solacing to think that this message is motivated by fear—and indeed, the witchcraft theme is probably meant to suggest Updike’s recognition of some feminine claims to an original relation
to the universe, albeit one that can only be imagined as malific. But the
tone of the book suggests contempt. The powers that his three so-called
witches possess are brummagem and stupidly employed. At the same
time, in a novel whose emotional temperature is otherwise low, a
startling hatred emerges for women who do (or try to do) anything
seriously or well except copulate. The hatred displays itself in the
creation of savagely parodic figures who are exposed as hypocrites and
incompetents. Acting on behalf of the narrator, our womanly witches
direct their real hostility against such straw women. I think this killing
rage may reveal Updike's feelings about recent social change, feelings
otherwise well controlled by "comedy."

If Updike despises his witches' victims, he doesn't much like the
witches either, though their total immersion in self and sex he finds
refreshing, really womanly. Skimming rapidly from one consciousness
to another, he prevents the depiction of individual minds among these
witches, though he expends pages on the nuances of their bodies. Hating
other women as they do, their shallow friendship flourishes on nasty
gossip. Their former husbands have disappeared with scarcely a memory
trace. Only one of the witches seems to know the names of her children.
These children are more supernatural than their mothers since they are
interchangeable and invisible, spending all their time at school, watch-
ing TV, or sleeping; hence requiring no maternal energy, time, or (a
word wildly out of place in this fiction) affection. Living on sporadic
child support checks, constantly harping on how poor they are, our
witches still don't need full-time jobs; they putter at sculpting, music,
writing, but mostly play tennis or cavort in the Jaccuzi with Satan. They
almost never shop, cook, clean; nothing goes wrong with their cars,
appliances, or houses. Nor does poverty get in the way of the Vogue
model appearance of Updike's favorite of the trio, his recurrent skinny
sexy redhead. The whole thing—forget the witchcraft—is ridiculous,
but not, I suppose, in the way Updike intended.

Yet these absurdities are being praised by reviewers—women review-
ers too—as devastatingly accurate portrayals of divorced women. Even
stranger, the alleged acuteness of observation is being accepted as
mitigation of, even justification for, the vengefulness of Updike's fiction-
al approach to women. How to explain such response? His current
literary reputation? The regularity with which attacks on women are
the matter of so-called "serious" fiction? Or perhaps a healthy caution
in dealing with a writer with—as one woman reviewer put it—such a
“real talent for malice”? Malice, by the way, is an exclusively female trait in *The Witches of Eastwick*; even the stupidest man is well-intentioned. Whatever the explanation, no well-placed reviewer seems ready to observe that these clothes have no emperor.

No similar reviewer restraint has operated in the case of Germaine Greer’s more ambitious but equally unsuccessful new book, *Sex and Destiny*. Here reviewers are only too ready to point out the work’s numerous faults; and it is as they say disorganized, poorly researched, badly reasoned, and miserably written. The chief complaint, however, seems to be that Greer now abandons, indeed denounces, her earlier feminism. This is an objection both right and wrong, and probably irrelevant. What does seem open to criticism is the way in which, while depending on her reputation as advocate of sexual permissiveness to ensure reader interest, Greer obfuscates her reversal of the themes of her earlier writings; specifically, while denouncing evangelists of sexual permissiveness and deploiling the results of their campaign, she fails to acknowledge her own role in that campaign. This seems faint-hearted.

Criticism of Greer for abandoning feminism, however, fails to remember how many different kinds of opinion that word subsumes. The focus of Greer’s work has always been, and is still, female sexual activity, a topic which by no means implies a feminist treatment—observe, for example, *The Witches of Eastwick*. Indeed, as *The Witches of Eastwick* as well as Updike’s earlier fiction shows (along with the fiction of others, Roth and Mailer, for example), a program of sexual abandon for women is not notably “feminist” to begin with. If everyone had equated the sexual revolution with the feminist revolution, as some did in the early 1970s, we would not now have a woman on the Supreme Court, nor women construction workers, nor even Germaine Greer. And American politicians would be indifferent to women’s votes. Perhaps Greer is reluctant to underscore her change of heart because to do so would involve acknowledging how small a role her frivolous message has played in the social changes of the last fifteen years.

Even so, *Sex and Destiny* is a wiser book than *The Female Eunuch*. It perceives two crucial points that the earlier work missed—points which Updike has yet to grasp. First, power is unequally distributed between the sexes in all societies and therefore “sexual freedom” cannot be the same thing for a man and a woman. Second, the one and only significant biological difference between men and women (never mind the Freudian can’t) is, especially as intensified by social practice the world over,
truly life-determining: sex for women produces children. But this new-found wisdom does not take Greer very far. Instead of the cult of recreative sex, she now espouses the cult of children, but she does so for precisely the same reasons: kids give a woman pleasure. It is still pleasure that controls her view of social good and human freedom.

The avowed thesis of Greer’s book is that “we” in the “west,” feminists and non-feminists alike, hate children because they interfere with our crude materialistic and self-indulgent notions of pleasure; and that our intervention in the reproductive arrangements of other cultures is disastrously skewed by this bias. In other cultures everybody loves kids and institutions reflect this love; women, the bearers and raisers of children, are valued and, hence, doubly happy: they have the pleasure of being esteemed, and the pleasure of their children. Among a variety of alleged cultural forms in traditional societies Greer’s favorite is the extended family, where women are protected, freed by male labor to devote themselves completely to the joys of motherhood, yet saved from isolation and monotony by the presence of other adult women. If such a structure requires male dominance, so be it.

Greer merits praise for reminding us how intervention in the lives of other people can go astray without sensitivity and intelligence, but these warnings do not compensate for her gross simplifying and romanticizing of other cultures as well as our own into a dualism of pure good and evil. I view this melodrama as the expression of a powerful desire, rising perhaps from loneliness and fatigue. Among different styles of “liberated woman” Greer’s has been more than most that of the loner; and that is a difficult road to travel for a lifetime. But what if Greer’s book expresses a new sense of the value of human community? That is not antifeminist, and seems neither a personal failure nor testimony to the demise of women’s aspirations to social justice and equal opportunities.

More generally, it is important to observe that Greer’s lifelong theoretical preoccupation with sexual behavior, now chastely renamed, limits her ability to deal usefully with her topic here in the same way that it limited the reach of The Female Eunuch. For just as incessant female sexual activity, with or without pleasure or guilt, has little to do with women’s claim to be accorded equal human status with men—The Witches of Eastwick makes more than clear that such presumed activity underlies the myth that we are inhuman—so “reproductive behavior” has little to do, over the long haul, with what being a mother is all about.
The condition of being a mother is not conceiving or birthing children, but having them around for quite a number of years thereafter. That is the "destiny" part of sex. It is a matter on which Greer seems as ignorant as Updike. And this is a pity, for it is almost certainly a matter of greatest moment for both individual women and our society as a whole. On the one hand, can we create social structures sensitive to the claims of children, as well as of working women, mothers, and (in American society) the majority of women who are both of these at the same time? On the other, can we demystify motherhood to the point that being a mother or having the capability of so being does not define one as a different order of human from the male of our species?

In these works by Greer and Updike I observe a commentary on women that is out of touch with current events. "Backlash," some are saying, but it looks more like time warp to me. Greer's opening lament on mothers isolated in the suburbs seems to have little point for a society in which most mothers are now working; her elegy for professional women electing childlessness is now moot, since numbers of them are electing to have children later in life than in previous generations. But such timely issues as the "feminization of poverty" and the problems of raising children without fathers are not to be found in Greer's book; her England has a Queen and a Princess Di, but no Margaret Thatcher. Updike's so-called divorced women, clones of the married swingers of his other fiction, likewise are no kin to real-life "displaced homemakers," relics of successful men now making it with younger women. And absent from both accounts are not only the "traditional" women—librarians, teachers, writers—but also the woman astronaut, Nobel prize winner, cabdriver, carpenter, firefighter, college president, marine, nuclear engineer, forest ranger, electrician, and—even as I write these words—Vice-Presidential candidate. Updike's backdating reveals his recognition that he hasn't caught up with history; Greer seems unaware. Both books are too detached from the real world to engage reader interest.

The concept of mimesis is an outcast in the world of literary theory these days, but the writer addressing a large public and purporting to describe or represent is validly held to certain requirements. What, at a minimum, might these be if one claims to write about contemporary American women? I propose three. 1) Women, like men, are human; whatever qualities (good and bad) a particular writer associates with that term must be attributed to both sexes. 2) Women and men in every
segment of society, however, are differently raised, regarded, and re-
warded, and adapt accordingly. A writer must show sensitivity to such
adaptations. 3) Recently throughout all segments of American society
there have been, however caused, striking changes (not necessarily
improvements) in women’s lives. Such changes cannot be ignored.
That these minima need not produce formulaic writing in fact or
fiction can be seen in two very different recent books: Gail Godwin’s
novel, A Mother and Two Daughters, and Vivian Gornick’s study, Women
in Science. In both books a strong narrator, secure in her own selfhood,
grants women subjects their individual voices. Both recognize how
much besides gender enters into the construction of a personal reality,
but acknowledge shared aspects of female experience. Godwin develops
three altogether distinct contemporary women characters in a nexus of
complicated erotic, familial, and social relationships. Gornick sketches
an array of separate women whom her account links through their
passion to do science. Their female commonality is not their gender per
se, but what that gender tends to call out in male scientists: opposition,
disrespect, the desire for dominance.
To put the title Women in Science next to Sex and Destiny, A Mother
and Two Daughters next to The Witches of Eastwick, is to suggest the
comparison I am stressing. Updike and Greer are more alike than either
of them would probably care to be thought; social observation in the two
books suffers from having lost contact with the concrete subject. Greer
compensates with statistics and generalizations, Updike with descrip-
tions of surface. Women escape them both.