

1979

Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel: Studies on Brontë, Woolf, Lessing, and Atwood, by Barbara Hill Rigney. The University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 1978 (Book Review)

Nancy Topping Bazin
Old Dominion University, nancybazin@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_fac_pubs



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Original Publication Citation

Bazin, N.T. (1979). Madness and sexual politics in the feminist novel: Studies on Brontë, Woolf, Lessing, and Atwood, by Barbara Hill Rigney. The University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 1978 (Book Review). *Doris Lessing Newsletter*, 3(2), 6.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ODU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ODU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@odu.edu.

Book Review

Barbara Hill Rigney. *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel: Studies in Brontë, Woolf, Lessing, and Atwood*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978. \$15.00

Barbara Hill Rigney's aim in *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel* is "to reconcile feminism and psychology in the areas of literary criticism" and "to find examples in the major works of four representative feminist writers of the relationship between madness and the female condition" (p. 3). Rigney analyzes four novels, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Doris Lessing's *The Four-Gated City*, and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, and finds that "all depict insanity in relation to sexual politics and state that madness, to a greater or lesser degree, is connected to the female social condition" (p. 7).

Although Rigney's chapter on Lessing does not in itself offer new insights into *The Four-Gated City*, her book as a whole does help us to see Lessing within a context of other feminist writers. Many of the patterns scholars have been noting in Lessing's work (the quest for a mother, the doppelgänger, the search for the self through madness, the process of becoming one's own mother) are not unique but shared by other women writers. Rigney suggests that these patterns exist because of the nature of the female experience in a patriarchal world.

Lessing's indebtedness to R. D. Laing (also discussed in articles published in 1976 by Roberta Rubenstein in *Psychoanalytic Review* and by Marion Vlastos in *PMLA*) perhaps led Rigney to see that Laing's view of insanity can "provide a base from which to begin a feminist psychoanalytic approach to literature" (p. 8). Although Laing paid very little attention to women and, when he did, saw them primarily as destructive mothers, he has seen, as have feminists, the connections between politics and madness on both the individual and the collective level. Rigney points out that Laing saw oppression as "society's own pervasive mental sickness, symptomized by its necessity to create categories and assign roles, its predilection to inhibit and control those who reject or would modify such roles" (p. 126).

In the four feminist novels Rigney has selected, the protagonists are in revolt against prescribed roles, and they find themselves surviving by calling into play a variety of false selves which co-exist with the hidden "real" self. To release themselves from this schizophrenic experience, they search for a mother or alternative superior self (respectively, Bertha, Septimus, Lynda, the mother) who can aid them in achieving reintegration. Wholeness can be reached only through certain trials and agonies and the experience of the loss of self. The mythic quest ends in the death of the selected doppelgänger and consequently the achievement of an integrated, stronger identity. Rigney

emphasizes the courage of these protagonists and their ultimate victories over their oppression: "For the female individual to survive, she must recognize and reject not only the pathology of social and sexual arrangements but her own participation in these arrangements as well" (pp. 126-27). Once this is done, all four protagonists affirm "a superior sanity based on personal order and the discovery of at least the potential for an authentic and integrated self" (p. 127).

Rigney finds the four novelists sharing several of Laing's ideas. The first is that madness is a "'sane' response to life in a destructive society" (p. 8); the madness, therefore, of Bertha, Septimus, Lynda, and Atwood's nameless protagonist has been seen by many feminists to be justified given the pressures acting upon each. In Rigney's words, Laing sees madness as "a stage in the evolution of a conscious, truly sane person," because wholeness can be achieved only after "divisions are seen and mended" (p. 8). *Jane Eyre*, *Clarissa Dalloway*, and *Martha Quest* experience madness mainly through their doubles — Bertha, Septimus, and Lynda, but Atwood's protagonist, inspired by her father and mother, takes the journey herself into and out of madness. Secondly, Laing's political explanation for the existence of divided selves clarifies the existence in all four novels of the doppelgänger, which represents "the recognition of the tragedy of one's own fragmentation and alienation from the self" (p. 10). Just as Laing saw his psychotic patients, these novelists see their "schizophrenic" protagonists as engaged in a mythic quest for truth and integration. This quest forces them to embark "on a search for the metaphoric mother": "what each of the protagonists is to discover, however, is that she must find a mother within the self, and so begin the return from psychosis" (pp. 11-12). For all four novelists the quest for the mother within the self is a quest for a feminist sense of self-worth.

Rigney's contribution to our knowledge lies in the connections she has made among the novels in her introductory and concluding chapters rather than in the four chapters devoted to discussion of the individual books. The chapters on *Jane Eyre* and *Surfacing* are more informative than those on *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Four-Gated City*, but none of them offer many new insights. Rather, in all four we can find a coherent (and therefore useful) summary of the feminist points that have already been made about the novels. Yet Rigney's ability to articulate well the interrelationships between sex roles, male dominance, and madness, particularly in the first and last chapters, provides us with an extremely valuable framework that illuminates the female experience and the mythic patterns through which that experience is expressed in literature.

Nancy Topping Bazin
Old Dominion University
Women's Studies