Being Ugly: Southern Women Writers and Social Rebellion by Monica Carol Miller (review)

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Edith Wharton Review, Volume 34, Number 1, 2018, pp. 93-97 (Review)

Published by Penn State University Press

engagement (187). In the spirit of Tuttle's assertion, the volume delivers on its critical promise to contribute to studies of Gilman and gender issues. So, too, do I believe that this collection of essays thoughtfully engages with ideas of place, and adds to the critical conversation by provoking thought within the scope of Gilman, place, western, Wharton, and feminist studies. The collection perhaps would have benefited from a more sustained and focused analysis on the ways Gilman's problematic views on race and eugenics—particularly later in her career—can shift the lens through which we read her depictions of utopian and dystopian spaces. Many of the texts covered in this volume cry out for that reading, and the authors themselves gesture toward this gap in Gilman studies—providing a fruitful area of inquiry for future work. Nonetheless, this excellent volume reminds us of Gilman's preeminent place in American literary studies by reinvigorating dialogues about her rebellion against male dominance and its relationship to Gilman's conception of place.

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Being Ugly: Southern Women Writers and Social Rebellion

By Monica Carol Miller

Louisiana State University Press, 2017. 176 pp. $39.95 cloth

Reviewed by Mary Carney, University of North Georgia

The southern grotesque is widely studied as a particular genre of American literature whose influence is felt beyond regional boundaries. Monica Carol Miller offers a refinement of this broad category in *Being Ugly: Southern Women*

Writers and Social Rebellion. While she focuses on canonical and lesser-known southern women writers, the implications of her work reach beyond gender or geography. Miller explains that these writers use the trope of "ugly" to not only "speak back to the gyneolatrous southern ideologies, but call into question more general, national paradigms of femininity" (148). Courtship and marriage plots are familiar paradigms, but Miller identifies a new narrative structure: the ugly plot. In examining characters depicted as physically or behaviorally ugly, she illuminates how their subversive presence might undermine the expectations of marriage and motherhood, creating "a space for imagining alternative household configurations and ways of living" (2). In recognizing the personal choices and adaptive lives of these characters, Miller creates a fresh model in which these ugly characters are not simply objects, but are agents of their own appearances and lives. These characters' power emerges from "differing from the norm enough in a negative way to catch the attention while simultaneously repulsing the viewer" (1). This dance of attraction and repulsion serves as a means to rebel against the strictures of gyneolatry, an adulation of women that can result in limiting domestic spaces and gender roles. Writing becomes a "politics of dissent" wherein characters "whose class status, race, ethnicity, or rebellion against the status quo threaten the stability of the dominant, white southern culture" (2). Miller shows how these women writers are challenging the use of white females as emblematic of the South and questioning the South as "the nation's feminine other as well as its racist underside" (150). Miller's book will be of interest to a range of scholars and readers interpreting women's writing; further, it will resonate with scholars of American and gender studies.

Being Ugly: Southern Women Writers and Social Rebellion comprises an introduction, five chapters, and a brief conclusion. In the first chapter, "What Is Ugliness? The Specifically Southern Meaning of Ugly," Miller shows how her study of the gendered concepts of ugliness aligns with the New Southern Studies and its "attention to the significance of the grotesque female body" (20). Miller provides theoretical contexts that show the "body as a dialectical constructed entity" (42). Miller draws on a range of theoretical foundations to discuss corporality and beauty, including Susan Bordo, Judith Butler, Umberto Eco, Mary Russo, Elaine Scarry, and Nancy Etcoff. While she finds that much is made of female physicality in southern gothic and grotesque literature, ugliness "should be considered as a discrete, separate category both because of its regional meaning and its very ordinariness" (21). Central to this discussion are questions of what constitutes normal for girls and women, especially within the framework of courtship and marriage. In exploring how ugliness is

defined, Miller identifies the power of these characters; specifically, she finds that authors may create a nonnormative character who "resists the object position and instead insists upon her own position as subject" (24). Writers, then, can create a powerful statement: "The figure of the ugly woman functions as an important site of potential resistance for women against the nearly irresistible interpellation into the beauty-industrial complex, strict southern gender roles, and their hegemonic value strictures" (25).

In chapter 2, "*Gone with the Wind*: A Model of Productive Failure," Miller examines Margaret Mitchell's novel, occasionally contrasting it with the movie. She points out that while the novel opens with a statement of Scarlett O'Hara's plainness, the author's description is lost in the casting of the actress Vivien Leigh. O'Hara has an aristocratic mother and an Irish father, thus catalyzing her liminal role in racial, ethnic, and class issues of the nineteenth-century Deep South. Miller highlights a number of ugly plots within the novel wherein Scarlett fails to embody or achieve what is expected by the cultural norms predicted by her mother's lineage. These subversive plots culminate in three failed marriages and a different vision for family without a husband, an alternative path for a white, upper-class woman. Ultimately, though, O'Hara's mixed lineage contributes to her adaptability in response to her own failures and the challenging conditions of wartime and Reconstruction. She behaves in unladylike or ugly ways. Miller asserts that even such a racist, conservative novel uses the ugly plot to subvert limited social expectations.

In the third chapter, "The Medusa Stares Back: Ugly Women in the Work of Eudora Welty," Miller draws parallels between Medusa's power and that of ugly characters. Drawing on Laurent Berlant's "Re-writing the Medusa: Welty's 'The Petrified Man,'" Miller shows how "Medusan" ugliness momentarily captures the attention of a viewer (61). Miller likens this recurrent event in early Welty stories to another theme scholars have identified: petrifaction. Welty underscores the "intersubjective nature of ugliness" (63), a kind of violation of expectations that triggers a reciprocal gaze wherein the looker and looked upon enter into a visual exchange. In addition to character analysis, Miller examines stylistic and word choices that, in part, provide space for readers to contribute to elliptical moments. While conveying the authorial vision, Welty highlights "the reader's similar role in constructing her own understanding of the story" (88). The numerous ugly and often marginalized characters in Welty's fiction may elicit a reader's discomfort and give "productive opportunities" to see these characters as central to Welty's effort to reframe traditional ideas about women's lives.

The next chapter studies a range of writers to illuminate the paradoxes of life as an unmarried woman, a role essential to the community but simultaneously rebellious of norms. In "The Ugly Plot: The Generative Possibilities of Failure," Miller draws on a number of theoretical insights into ugliness and abjection, but fundamental is queer negativity as theorized by Lee Edelman and Judith Halberstam. Challenging the social expectations of southern womanhood can generate deeper questioning and revision of gender roles. This chapter discusses a range of writers and texts, including Welty's "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies," Katherine Ann Porter's *The Old Order*, Marjorie Kinnan Rawling's "Gal Young 'Un," Monique Truong's *Bitter in the Mouth*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. The characters have physical appearances deemed ugly that arise from genetics, hard work, or privation. Miller distinguishes southern women writers from southern men writers in their use of these types of female characters. For the former, the women are often symbolic of the failed South; for the latter, the ugly woman is "not symbolic of the larger southern tragedies, but is instead a rejection of the symbology of the pedestal" (100). These writers envision a community "in which female friendship replaces heterosexual marriage as the primary bonds in a woman's life" (122).

In chapter 5: "Choosing to Be Ugly: Active Rebellion from Flannery O'Connor to Helen Ellis," Miller turns from characters whose ugliness arises from their circumstances to those who actively seek to appear or act ugly. She traces these plots through selected works of Zora Neale Hurston, Lee Smith, Flannery O'Connor, and Helen Ellis. These southern authors offer a range of ugly plots situated in diverse socioeconomic circumstances that shape the characters' opportunities for and responses to courtship, marriage, and alternative avenues for material security or social status. Across the spectrum, "the rigid requirement of femininity, marriage, and motherhood are openly rejected and rebelled against by women who make themselves ugly through their clothes, carriage, and behavior" (145). Miller's intricate analysis of these plots and characters shows how their choices are acts of rebellion against the narrow strictures of southern womanhood.

Throughout this slim monograph, Miller refines her readers' understanding of physical aesthetics and female power within social systems, a theme familiar to Wharton scholars. Perhaps the rise of the superficially beautiful Undine Spragg or the decline of the exquisite Lily Bart might be freshly illuminated through Miller's insights into physical and behavioral constructions of beauty. Wharton's critique of the marriage economy and her exploration of female

agency precede those of the authors in this study, suggesting an opportunity to consider Wharton's influence.

Miller's focused examination of ugly women in marginalized America invites a reexamination of many fictions that present contested female bodies that reject social norms. Though the work takes as its subject southern women writers, Miller's fresh approach to depictions of ugliness and her framing of the ugly plot will be valuable to scholars seeking to understand the complexities of not only southern fictions but also other works that discuss embodied notions of power.

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