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### Infection in the Ideology

In “Infection in the Sentence: the Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship,” Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest that the female writer uniquely struggles to believe in her capacity for creation, a fear they call “the anxiety of authorship” and attribute to a dearth of female representation in literary history (Gilbert & Gubar 11). While Gilbert and Gubar employ a robust feminist philosophy to illuminate the reality of stymied female creation and other consequences of a patriarchal canon, they struggle to imagine a feminist metric of creative success unpreoccupied with autonomous self-definition and, instead, invested in reconciling the cultural saturation of female bodies with the reality of fallible corporealities. Given this oversight, an integration of critical disability theory, as suggested in Rosemarie-Garland’s Thomson’s essay “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” stands to provide an understanding of success for female creatives divorced from patriarchal corporeal hierarchies and reflective of the universal experience of embodiment.

In connecting disability theory and pre-existing feminist thought, Garland-Thomson strives to reveal the hermeneutical similarities between the two interpretative lenses. “One way to think about feminist theory,” Garland-Thomson begins as she explains the overlapping realms of disability and feminist theory, “is to say that it investigates how culture saturates the particularities of bodies with meanings and probes the consequences of those meanings” (Garland-Thomson 335). Garland-Thomson’s understanding of feminism as an exploration of interpretable bodies aligns with Gilbert and Gubar’s operative mode in “Infection in the Sentence.” After Gilbert and Gubar introduce the concept of “anxiety of authorship,” the pair pay particular attention to the female inability to “beget’ art upon the (female) body of the muse” given male writers’ historical projections upon the

female form (12). Given the vectored relationship of male creator and female muse, Gilbert and Gubar argue that “[The female writer’s] battle is not against her (male) precursor’s reading of the world but against his reading of *her*” (12). Thus, Gilbert and Gubar are explicitly concerned with the baggage of the female body, and seek to illuminate its far-reaching consequences. “Peering obsessively into the real as well as metaphoric looking glasses that surround her, she desires literally to “reduce” her own body,” Gilbert and Gubar provide as an explanation for the disproportionate rates of anorexia and agoraphobia among women (16). Women’s bodies, per this analysis, exist as sites of male extrapolation and ironic isolation from women’s perceptions of themselves; in an effort to minimize these painful misrepresentations, women subconsciously correlate the degree to which they are interpreted to their noticeability, and thus attempt to reduce their corporeal footprint in painful and life-threatening ways. Therefore, Gilbert and Gubar recognize that much of the anguish of womanhood finds origin in the conclusions drawn from female bodies, and demonstrate a pre-existing, if not yet acknowledged, dialogue with Garland-Thomson’s interdisciplinary approach.

The pair diverge with Garland-Thomson, however, when they move to imagining the future for female creators. In Gilbert and Gubar’s view, women writers must “overc[o]me the anxiety of authorship” like the triumphant women writers of the nineteenth century; they insist that Austen, Shelley, Barrett-Browning, Bronte, et al. self-consciously “repudiated debilitating patriarchal prescriptions” and were “often both literally and figuratively concerned with disease, as if to emphasize the effort with which health and wholeness were won from the infectious ‘vapors’ of despair and fragmentation” (18-19). According to Gilbert and Gubar, contemporary female writers must “trace the difficult paths” of these women to “find their distinctive female power...” (19). As Gilbert and Gubar conceive of the possibility of female triumph over patriarchy in the paragraph, they require a curing of anxiety, a fight against disease, and ultimately, a victory of autonomy.

Yet, Garland-Thomson takes issue with feminism's historical goal of individualist achievement. In demonstrating the overlap between disability studies and feminist thought – and the networks of solidarity made available by integrating disability studies into feminist discourse – Garland-Thomson criticizes liberal feminism's attempts to overcome bodily limitations. “An equality model of feminist theory sometimes prizes individualistic autonomy as the key to women's liberation,” Garland-Thomson states, “A feminist disability theory, however, suggests that we are better off learning to...accommodate the bodies limits and evolutions than trying to eliminate or deny them” (346). Therefore, in her incorporation of disability theory to feminist thought, Garland-Thomson provides a critique to Gilbert and Gubar's idealized victory of “health and wholeness” (Gilbert & Gubar 18). According to Garland-Thomson, feminist creation does not depend upon achieving “health and wholeness” to produce an individualistic representation of self; instead, feminist creation resists a “phallic ideology” that “denies the knowledge of bodily vulnerability, contingency, and mortality” and instead embraces the impossibility of self-representation uninfluenced by the material conditions of a physical form (346). Through this analysis, Garland-Thomson illuminates how female creation necessarily must accommodate feminized pathology and pathologized femininity, for a feminist disability ideology does not submit to the patriarchal adage that mental triumph over a fallible physical form produces a true self. Instead, feminist thinkers should imagine creative victories cognizant of the bodies from which they sprung, a vision that repurposes the patriarchal saturation of bodies rather than submitting to it.

Therefore, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson contributes to the work of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar by drawing attention to the impossibility of autonomous self-representation. This critical revelation thus allows female creatives to see that their “distinctive female power” lies in the recognition of the fallibility of the physical form, its limits on self-definition, and how these realities do not restrain honest creation, but fundamentally allow it.

### Works Cited

- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory." *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard J. Davis, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013. ProQuest Ebook Central, pp. 333-353.
- Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. "Infection in the Sentence: the Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship." *Feminisms Redux: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, edited by Robyn Warhol-Down and Diane Price Herndl. Rutgers University Press, 1991, pp. 9-20.