1996

For Gerty Had Her Dreams That No-One Knew Of

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Recommend Citation
https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-english-lit/222
A feminist account of "Nausicaa" might begin by noting that, until the 1980s, it has been read—canonically and with gender indifference—as a comic exposure of Gerty's dreams of her own uniqueness. Thanks to Joyce's liberating techniques, her entrapping dreams have been precisely what we all know about. This widely shared reading polarizes Joyce's stylistic flexibility against Gerty's rigidity by splitting the chapter into the gazed-upon antics of Gerty versus the unco-opted thoughts of Bloom. As Patrick McGee has warned, however, this reading naturalizes and hierarchizes opposing styles, genders, genres. I'd like to probe Gerty's "dreams that no-one knew of" in two ways: first, by analyzing the cultural activity that produces such dreams, and second, by destabilizing the polarity between Gerty as caught and Bloom as free. As Eve Sedgwick has argued with respect to Proust, the highlighting of one closet—one arena that is being exposed—often implies the strategic concealing of another, this one less amenable to assessment. I'll try to identify that other, concealed closet.

Gerty's foolishness was always highlighted, but, beginning with Suzette Henke a decade ago, we've begun to analyze her more precisely as a creature of her culture. Modern advertising has generated the lineaments of her subjectivity. Her body has been relentlessly trained to accede to her society's gender directives: iron-jelloids, Widow Welch's female pills, lemon juice, queen of ointments, Mme Vera Verity, Princess Novelette, Clery's summer sales, "eyebrowleine," the newest thing in footwear. . . . The list is long and familiar. Gerty is wholly tracked within a narrative of ersatz satisfactions that will apparently make up for—but actually energize forever—the class- and gender-caused poverty of her life. In Althusser's terms, she has been interpellated—
“Hey you!” the ads have proclaimed, and by responding “Me? You mean, Me?” she has defined herself as a woman with “dreams no-one knew of” and been defined as a woman in thrall to those same culturally dispensed dreams. Subjectivity and ideology are mutually constitutive terms; in Gerty we see their virtually formulaic fusion.

Twenty years ago Gerty’s clichés were an easy target. Cliché itself was a safely delimited term, for the text seemed effectively to distinguish between its own free language on the one hand and Gerty’s entrapping language on the other. There was little attempt to see what it might mean more generally to speak other peoples’ language. (We of course spoke our own—this went without saying.) Since then, Bakhtin and Foucault have shown us the sense in which we always speak other peoples’ language, that the social/ideological aspect of being in language is irresistible. “The ideological becoming of a human being . . . is the process of selectively assimilating the word of others” Bakhtin writes in “Discourse in the Novel” (341). To speak is to enact group affiliation; selfhood is inalienably social, an affair of others.

Foucault has argued further, in Discipline and Punish, that the body is socially programmed at all times, and that this programming is consensual, not inflicted. “The body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body,” he writes (26). Subjected and subjectified as well, so that inscription and desire are no longer opposed but welded: “and her face was suffused with a divine, an entrancing blush . . . and he could see her other things too, nainsook knickers, the fabric that caresses the skin, better than those other pettiwidth, the green, four and eleven, on account of being white and she let him” (U-GP 13:723-26). In the midst of this erotic flow comes the price of the garments, and that phrase—“the fabric that caresses the skin”—that registers simultaneously the ad Gerty has ingested and the flush that she feels as it does its promised job. This fetishized object, like those others clustered in Gerty’s “girlish treasure trove” (U-GP 13:638-39), reifies Gerty into an assortment of culturally validated icons of self-worth. These mirror back to her where she has come from (“her child of Mary badge”), where she is going (to capture a man), and how she will do it: by guising herself in guaranteed apparel.

This Foucault/Althusser reading might close by noting that men at every point pace and inflect Gerty’s erotic narrative: it is Father Conroy who “told her that time when she told him about that in confession . . . not to be troubled because that was only the voice of nature and we were all subject to nature’s laws, he said, in this life and that that was no sin because that came from the nature of woman instituted by God, he said, and that Our Blessed Lady herself said to the archangel Gabriel be it done unto me according to Thy Word” (U-GP 13:453-59). The male-dispensed Catholic narrative concedes and contains female sexuality by not naming it. Menstruation’s studied referent is “that” and Gerty is not to worry because God has instituted “that.” Through the triply masculine filters of God, Gabriel, and Father Conroy, Gerty
receives her sexual message: that it will be done unto her in the appropriate ways, and that the vicissitudes of desire itself—which she knows only as sensation on the skin and the scalp, and which she can refer to only as "this" or as "a thing like that," certainly distinct from "the other thing," which you weren't supposed to do—have been foreseen and mapped by the Church. Gerty's lexical vagueness here is destiny itself: the words "that," "this," and "thing" are forced to do duty for crucial distinctions—menstruation, lust, masturbation, intercourse—for which it is of the first importance to have differential language in order to access them, interrelate them, and generate out of their differences a minimally liberated sexual identity.

Gerty has hardly a clue as to her problem. Power acts upon her molecularly, not coercively. Her social inscription registers precisely at those unself-conscious moments when she punctuates her narrative by proclaiming who she "instinctively" is. The word "instinct" (or its cognates) occurs as noun, adjective, or adverb four times in her narrative, at each point naturalizing her sense of self and revealing to us the nodes of her social construction: "Gerty was dressed simply but with the instinctive taste of a votary of Dame Fashion" (U-GP 13:148), "because she felt instinctively that he was like no-one else" (U-GP 13:428), "her woman's instinct told her that she had raised the devil in him" (U-GP 13:517), "from everything in the least indelicate her finebred nature instinctively recoiled" (U-GP 13:660-61). In these instances we find the bedrock word—instinct—employed to guarantee the inbred (rather than trained) quality of her clothing choices, the natural (rather than gender-taught) character of her desire for Bloom, and the morally immaculate tenor of her otherwise dubious sexual escapade. In these ways her vocabulary legitimates her behavior, confirms her unique identity, and arrests her in mystification.

This reading of Gerty seems to me unanswerable, but there has recently emerged a feminist counterreading that proposes a Gerty MacDowall who is not simply victimized. Embodying desire and revealing under closer scrutiny a complex erotic agenda, this Gerty MacDowall does not serve as a passive mirror for male sexual affirmation. Rather, the mirror moves on its own, using the gazing male as the stimulant for its own reflexive pleasures, neatly reversing the paradigm. Kimberly Devlin makes this feminist and Lacanian argument, proposing a Gerty who manages, in a male-defined culture, to achieve jouissance on condition that it escape the Catholic censor; a Gerty viewed as the site of linguistic disturbance rather than a fixed and silly figure. There remains one further dimension to the resurrection of Gerty, perhaps the most suggestive of all, for it refuses the high culture/low culture binary that has condescendingly subtended our treatment of this chapter. I am thinking of Margot Norris's work on "Nausicaa" and even more of Jennifer Wicke's analysis of the place of advertising in modern culture. Showing that the subject's absorption of advertising enables a metempsychotic journey—"in and through
consumption, in all its array, a transmigration of subjectivity is enacted into objects and back again" (U-GP 13:761)—Wicke argues for a Molly Bloom actively, coherently, invested in the work of consuming, not idly or passively victimized by it. In similar manner, Gerty MacDowall lives her cultural furnishing: "the fabric that caresses the skin" does indeed caress it, and she has cogently decked herself out in the garb, manners, thoughts, and feelings—all culturally proposed—that permit her sexual release. I realize this low-cultural analysis of everyday viability is in tension with the high-cultural one that be­moans her victimization; both make sense to me. Rather than explore either further, I turn instead to Bloom.

It is here, with Bloom, that our commentary has altered the least. Put other­wise, what imaginary arrangements are we still protecting through this pre­served reading? Joyce's prose for him is so welcome after Gerty's sticky rhetoric that even if we grant that stream of consciousness now emerges (after four chapters without it) as a style—rather than as nature itself—even so, we have tended to let him run away with the chapter. I'd like to begin a reading of Bloom that is more aware of his gendered optic.

First, consider his focus on menstruation: "near her monthlies, I expect, makes them feel ticklish" (U-GP 13:777-78), "How many women in Dublin have it today?" (U-GP 13:781-82), "Devils they are when that's coming on them" (822), "Wonder if it's bad to go with them then. Safe in one way. Turns milk, makes fiddlestrings snap" (U-GP 13:825-26), "Some women, instance, warn you off when they have their period. Come near. Then get a hogo you could hang your hat on" (U-GP 13:1031-32). Granted, these speculations live among hundreds of others about the strange smells and behavior of fish, bats, dogs, and other creatures. The point is that women are inexhaustibly strange for Bloom—other, arousing, disturbing, creaturely—and their difference from men (which he seems to construe as natural—"Who did you learn that from? Nobody. . . . O don't they know!" [U-GP 13:924-25]) ceaselessly interests him.

Women are routinely referred to in his narrative in the plural. His text abounds with generalizations about what "they" do. "Because they want it themselves. Their natural craving" (U-GP 13:790–91), "Excites them also when they're. I'm all clean come and dirty me. And they like dressing one another for the sacrifice" (U-GP 13:797–98), and perhaps most succinctly this tableau: "Tableau! O, look who it is for the love of God! How are you at all? What have you been doing with yourself? Kiss and delighted to, kiss, to see you. Picking holes in each other's appearance. You're looking splendid. Sister souls. Showing their teeth at one another. How many have you left? Wouldn't lend each other a pinch of salt" (U-GP 13:815–20). Tableau indeed: the picture that emerges here is as saturated in a culture's gender assumptions as Gerty's pictures were. Only here the bias is subtler, diffused within the shapelessness of stream of consciousness and widely shared by the text's male readership. Women fawn upon each other, vie with each other for attractive males,
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are deceitful, selfish, and as free from guilt as cats. Their narcissism is hypnotic. Bloom has no hesitancy in so categorizing them, and no interest in the social forces that may have produced this kind of behavior. His narrative for women is as dependent upon instinct terms as Gerty’s was: “Where do they get that? Typist going up Roger Greene’s stairs two at a time to show her understandings. Handed down from father to, mother to daughter, I mean. Bred in the bone” (U-GP 13:916–18).

Bred in the bone. We understand that today to mean so deeply trained into us that it passes as nature, is invisible. And Bloom’s portion in “Nausicaa” has likewise passed as largely invisible, from a gender perspective. I suggest that this has occurred because the text rises out of and speaks to a male imaginary for whom the female is both innocent and arousing, erotic yet receptive: “all the dirty things I made her say” (U-GP 13:868). If the exposed closet in the first half of “Nausicaa” is Gerty’s “dreams that no-one knew of,” then the concealed one is Bloom’s own sexual imaginary, one that much of Joyce’s readership seems to share, an imaginary that we would indulge in, yet have no one know about, a set of dreams we have no intention of spotlighting as cultural script.

Gerty’s fantasies are laid open for symbolic assessment; Bloom’s are imaginarily shared, in secret. She is there for our delectation: first, the precoital spectacle of her being aroused by Bloom, then the postcoital dignity of Bloom’s wide-ranging thoughts. This arrangement too is gender shaped—the opening up of the female’s excitement, the private voyeurism of the male’s detumescence—for when we finally enter Bloom’s mind his thoughts “cap” hers and he is already, so to speak, safely zipped. The “we” parading throughout these last paragraphs is, of course, male. But many females have participated within its confines, we now can say, for it takes a feminist stance to nudge biological differences out of a pregiven polar opposition and to reveal gender positions as culturally produced.

I want to close by touching briefly on the question of male feminism itself. Stephen Heath’s arresting claim—“men’s relation to feminism is an impossible one”—seems to me both irrefutable and unacceptable (1). Irrefutable, because men just are the problem of feminism, the source—embodied locally and operative systemically—of the injustice women suffer from. After dismantling Freud’s claim that anatomy is destiny, feminists have retaught us the vicious ways in which it still is destiny. Men grow up differently, encounter social structures shaped preferentially for them, enjoy a time-and-power curve the reverse of women’s.

But Heath’s argument is also unacceptable, inasmuch as men (once they see the light) cannot but attempt (Heath included) to be feminists. Patrick McGee rightly claims that this attempt on our part is more than a matter of choice, by which I think he means that in involuntary ways we remain complicit in a male structure of privilege; but this attempt is also not simply a choice, inasmuch as we must be feminists—as we must oppose racism and
write against it, even though, if we are white, we are also complicit. Maleness (biological and cultural) is and is not our destiny: insofar as it is not we struggle to inhabit our maleness in a feminist way, revising our take on matters we had misread. I think we must be off-balance, unauthoritative, seeking neither to cash in on the central work done by women feminists nor to posture masochistically as hopelessly at fault and out of place on this terrain.

The two more radical alternative positions I know of are even less tenable: to assume in advance that our maleness invalidates any feminist stance we might articulate, or to envisage a wholesale dismantling of male and female altogether. A different way of being male, intent upon a more generous spectrum of relations to the female—this seems to me to be a worthwhile goal for any male feminist whose aim is to undo privilege, not to remove difference (including the eroticism of difference). Nausicaan comedy delights in the dialogic interplay (rather than melodramatic opposition) of norm and subversion, commodification and desire, containment and release, erotics male and female. Our own maleness neither licenses a special insight into Joyce's writing of gender in "Nausicaa" nor condemns us in advance to irrelevance. The best we can do may be to keep at it in our mix of good and bad faith, useful both in our critique of the postures we identify and in our being demonstrably caught up in them nevertheless.

WORKS CITED


