

Middlebrow Feminism

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WELL-BEHAVED WOMEN SELDOM MAKE HISTORY, by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. 284 pp. \$24.00

When Virginia Woolf used the word “middlebrow,” she was describing the editors and readers of *Vogue*, where she was allowed to write what she wanted, and poking fun at her Bloomsbury friends, who would never let their names appear in such a place.¹ Of course, by publishing Woolf, *Vogue* immediately ascended out of the middlebrow. “Highbrow” journals like *The Times Literary Supplement* refused to publish what Woolf wrote about Henry James, and she dismissed such snobbery for the sake of freedom. The word “middlebrow” has a far different valence in the U.S. today, implying comfort and consensus. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s book jumps from the academic highbrow world where she earned the Pulitzer Prize and the Bancroft Prize for *A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* to the middlebrow world of a kind of populist feminism.² A chaired professor at Harvard and a Phi Beta Kappa Scholar, Ulrich has spent her career writing as a well-behaved woman about well-behaved women whose voices had been lost to history.

Now she has written a book for middlebrow readers that might be called “Feminism Without Tears.” I imagine her heroines—Christine de Pisan, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Virginia Woolf—trying to wriggle out of Ulrich’s firm grasp, refusing to stay in the box. “But, you may say,”—the famous opening words of *A Room of One’s Own*, words that invite the reader to object or argue with the speaker—are words that come to my lips throughout this book.³ Certainly the feminism invoked in the potted biographies of her three feminist saints, all from secondary sources, cannot compare intellectually to her prize-winning original research in *A Midwife’s Tale*, says my scholarly self. Surely, contradicts my feminist conscience, the broad cultural effect of such an appeal to the unconverted is as important as documenting the lives of obscure white women.

What we have here is a positive narrative of (certain) women’s achievements embedded in a feminist history so soft that even Lynne Cheney might be delighted with it. The complicated, equivocal tone of the title—*Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History*—with its mild nonthreatening manner and the unsettling use of the word “seldom” is a clue to the

project of the book. It seems to be aimed at middle America and middle Americans, making a well-behaved women's history that is well within the comfort zone of conservative readers and moderate ones as well. Frankly, this is women's history American style: pragmatic and upbeat, a progress report in positive thinking about women's rise to equality. It can be safely given to fathers and their daughters—neither of whom will find themselves blamed for keeping women down—as well as to women who are purposefully well behaved as a conscious policy of distancing themselves from feminism. Radical feminists may object.

This is women's history for the masses and a secular hagiography of the author's heroines: Christine de Pizan, author of the fifteenth-century *Book of the City of Ladies*; the Virginia Woolf of *A Room of One's Own*; and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, by way of her memoir *Eighty Years and More* (1898). Ulrich's "buts" or rebuttals to these canonical texts are often essential. The book is packed with amazing stories of great and common women, with a truly wonderful chapter on Amazons using Lillian Robinson's brilliant tour de force from the Amazons to the comics.⁴ Ulrich gently brings her heroines up to date by revising their prejudices and supplying the lacks in their projects. Her chapter on all that Woolf lamented she did not know in the great historical gulf "between Sappho and Jane Austen"⁵ should be required reading with *A Room of One's Own* as a tribute to the research of historians in the waves of twentieth-century feminist scholarship.

Ulrich rewrites the books of each of these "ladies" in terms of the work done by her generation of historians to restore what Virginia Woolf called the "lives of the obscure,"⁶ or to look for "Anon," who "was often a woman" (*A Room of One's Own*, p. 49). In so doing, she supplies much that was missing for those "foremothers" who needed, but did not have, serious histories of women to help them understand themselves and their worlds. There are huge gaps, and Ulrich tries to fill them. The appeal of this book lies in its assumption of the reader's good will. This is no diatribe. She reaches out to welcome skeptics and nay-sayers in a story of the progress of women from oppression to equal rights, unassailable in her sure-footed inclusion of every imaginable reader on the side of such a natural feminist progress. It reminds me of *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, David Levering Lewis's popular history of the Harlem Renaissance, a text that never blamed the racists who held black people back but showed the progress of blacks as the progress of American enlightenment.⁷ White students (and their elders) could read this book without guilt. Likewise, readers of the formerly antifeminist persuasion are included in Ulrich's imagined audience cheering on the progress of women.

Ulrich's good behavior as a writer works well in presenting challenging ideas as just plain common sense. One has to applaud such a revisionary project in which the foremothers are not killed off, as in so many models

of male writing. Ulrich resurrects them, tweaking and tugging at their haloes as she slides them off their pedestals into the twenty-first century. To radical feminists they may now look like a set of inoffensive domestic corn-dolls. But her strategy may work to spread the word.

The title is a sentence that escaped from a scholarly article of Ulrich's in the 1970s, the great inaugural decade of feminist history, in which Ulrich was a serious participant, writing about the well-behaved women celebrated in Puritan funeral sermons. The sentence has since had a life of its own on t-shirts, bumper stickers, and coffee mugs. On the way, it has taken on many different meanings, creating a situation that allows Ulrich to write a funny introduction about American popular culture and the ways that the slogan is used to defend bad behavior. It is the "official maxim" of the Sweet Potato Queens of Jackson, Mississippi, who also have another t-shirt that says "Never Wear Panties to a Party." Ulrich is fascinated by all of the lives of the sentence and is well aware that its ambiguity is what constitutes its popularity among widely different groups. "The 'well-behaved women' quote works," she writes, "because it plays into long-standing stereotypes about the invisibility and the innate decorum of the female sex. . . . The problem with this argument is not only that it limits women. It also limits history. Good historians are concerned not only with famous people and public events but with broad transformations of human behavior" (pp. xxi-xxii).

Ulrich is a gifted story-teller; her book is not only readable but has the fast-paced narrative voice of fiction or memoir. Because she tells us about her own history as a historian with wit and modesty, we come to trust her versions of her saints' lives as well as her respectful but firm revisions of them. It is the *lives* of women she finds important. She does not fetishize their writing, even though their books have often become "bibles" of the women's movement. Revising the books for contemporary use, she has a healthy attitude compared to scholars who see the words as set in stone.

Ulrich taught her first women's studies class (like many of us) in 1975, and she is very proud of introducing a core course in women's history at Harvard in 1995. The dates can tell us a lot. Ulrich was a 36-year-old Mormon housewife when she went to graduate school, trying to balance her feminism with her Mormonism while writing and researching the lives of Utah Mormon women. It was a revelation. Mormon women had voted and held public office in Utah long before their counterparts in the East. Polygamists' wives had attended medical school and edited newspapers. She did not see their sexual slavery. When she was in New Hampshire, Ulrich began working on New England women, including the healer and "good wife" Martha Moore Ballard, who had kept a diary. *A Midwife's Tale* won both the Bancroft Prize and a Pulitzer, and Ulrich also published *The Age of Homespun* and *Good Wives*.⁸ She was then herself not only a pio-

neer historian of women but also a very distinguished prize when Harvard courted and hired her. She had begun her work on Cotton Mather's "hidden ones," the virtuous women who never behaved badly enough to warrant any public record of their lives.⁹ Ulrich's objective, she writes, "was not to lament their oppression but to give them a history" (*Well-Behaved Women*, p. xxviii). This philosophy, avoiding the controversial battles that raged in the formative years of women's history, combined with the mild and pragmatic nature of the good stories she wrote about good women and her unerring talent for narrative history, brought her serious rewards.

While others struggled with class and race in women's history and the ideas of revolutionary women like Emma Goldman and Rosa Luxembourg, Ulrich went to the library and documented these real and obscure white Americans whose stories women like Stanton or Woolf might want to hear. She was following in her own way what I remember so well from those stirring days at the Berkshire Women's History meetings, the methodology proposed by historian Jesse Lemisch called "History from the Bottom Up."¹⁰ Ulrich clearly did not share the radical politics of those left-wing historians who wanted to write the lives of sailors and working men and women, but she claims to have worked in the spirit of the great Gerda Lerner (quoted extensively in the last part of the book). Lerner, a towering figure in women's history, was educated in the gymnasiums of Vienna and had a powerful intellectual background that few nonscientist American women of her generation experienced.¹¹ Lerner could take on the challenge of a macrocosmic history of women in western civilization with a confidence gained from her powerful knowledge base. Ulrich chose to contribute to women's history studies of a microcosm of women who were white and well behaved. Now in this book she branches out in time and crosses the Atlantic as well. She compares Joan of Arc in a brilliant thumb-nail sketch to the Angolan heroine Njinga Mbandi, whose story was used by the abolitionist Lydia Maria Child to refute arguments about Africans being unfit for self-rule.

Ulrich's three exemplary lives and three canonical feminist books become occasions for connection (all three, she argues, were driven to write by discovering male disdain for women). She believes that Woolf would not have liked Stanton, misreading an ironic passage of *A Room of One's Own* in which the Englishwoman claims to have been happier about the fact that her aunt left her an annuity of five hundred pounds than the fact that she could now vote. Stanton could have been the friend of any one of Woolf's activist aunts. And, besides, Woolf herself worked licking envelopes for a suffrage organization that also demanded the franchise for men without property. "All three," Ulrich says, "identified with women yet imagined becoming male. In their work and in their lives, all three writers addressed an enduring puzzle: Are differences between the sexes innate or

learned? Using stories about the past to challenge history, they talked back to books" (p. 9). And Ulrich talks back to them in the voices of feminist scholars who have found flaws in their lives and in their writing.

She is remarkably calm in her cool criticism of Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours* and Nicole Kidman in the film version of Woolf's classic novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. I remember raging about Nicole Kidman's Jewish nose, as well as being subjected to two suicides, in case we did not get it. Christine de Pisan comes alive as a writer and a scribe, and Stanton is chided in the splendid chapter "Slaves in the Attic." I am overcome with admiration at the level tone she takes, the complete lack of moral superiority with which she improves on the ideas of the early feminists. Ulrich includes many lives of "common women," as if in answer to Woolf's search for Judith Shakespeare. She imagines Judith (actually the name of Shakespeare's daughter) as another well-behaved woman lost to history. But I think Woolf made up a radical Judith Shakespeare figure based on a popular novel of the 1890's for young readers. *Judith Shakespeare* by William Black imagined the bard's rebellious daughter learning to read secretly from a Quaker friend, reading her father's plays, and running off to London.¹²

The slaves in the attic that Ulrich brings to light in her work on Stanton were also, sadly, upstairs or downstairs from Woolf's Room. For American readers in particular the phrase, "I can pass a very fine negress without wanting to make an Englishwoman of her," is a difficulty, despite claims that the narrator and author are ironically asserting not to belong to the sex that runs the empire. But others, myself included, feel that the racism of our heroine has to be acknowledged. By the time she wrote *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf could accept black women as women. "For Stanton," Ulrich writes, "gender was always more important than race" (p. 141). This is true of the Woolf of *A Room of One's Own*, and it is a major problem for American readers especially.¹³ But it is a position she grew out of by the time she wrote *Three Guineas*.

But that's neither here nor there. It does make clear, however, that we really need as good an annotated edition of the now classic *A Room of One's Own* as the ones British feminists have produced. What is important is that Ulrich writes her own history as a historian and her version of her generation's feminist history in the chapters called "Waves" and "Making History." I cheer at the names—Renata Bridenthal, Gerda Lerner, Blanche Weisen Cook, Alice Kessler-Harris, and many more—and I think how important their work was and is. One hopes others will now be inspired to write the history of the great feminist scholars and activists of our time—Tillie Olsen, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Judy Chicago, Germaine Greer, and my own favorite among the socialist feminists, the late lamented Lillian Robinson, whose *Sex, Class, and Culture* was the model for me and many other feminist critics.¹⁴ Ulrich cites Robinson's work many times

in her chapter on Amazons, for Robinson was an accomplished scholar as well as the author of a book on Wonder Woman. I doubt if even the talented Ulrich could make Robinson's story upbeat, though it did have a happy ending. After decades of being a jobless badly behaved feminist who went from pillar to post supporting her child and writing Marxist feminist theory, she ended her days as the principal of the Simone de Beauvoir Institute in Montreal where her public behavior did not matter. Privately her exquisite manners recalled Jane Austen.

Is the corollary to "Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History," "Badly Behaved Women Always Make History"—strike, demonstrate, go to jail, decide to sit in the front of the bus, escape from slavery, make revolutions, get assassinated, get deported, rebel against sweatshops, down their tools in computer factories, or, as girl children in the sex trade, get swept away by tsunamis? Does notoriety still ensure ignominy and social ostracism in those women's lives, and then, perhaps, posthumous honor by historians?

I know this is a grudging hard feminist response to soft feminism. But this book deserves to be read by the wide audience it embraces. You'll be reading it out loud and quoting its quips in no time.

NOTES

¹ Virginia Woolf, "Middlebrow," in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1942), pp. 176-186.

² Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).

³ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, 1929); subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text. For good notes and background, see the Oxford World Classics 1998 ed. by Morag Shiach, which also includes *Three Guineas*. I emphasize the importance to readers of a good annotated edition.

⁴ Lillian S. Robinson, *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁵ See my "Thinking Back Through Our Mothers," in *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jane Marcus (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), p. 7; see also my "Still Practice, A/Wrested Alphabet: Toward a Feminist Aesthetic," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 3, Nos. 1 and 2 (1984), 80.

⁶ Woolf, "Lives of the Obscure," in *The Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt, 1925), pp. 106-133.

⁷ David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Knopf, 1981).

⁸ Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Knopf, 2001), and *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Knopf, 1982).

⁹ Ulrich, "Vertuous Women Found: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668-1735," *American Quarterly*, 28, No. 1 (1976), 20.

¹⁰ Jesse Lemisch, *Towards a Democratic History* (Ann Arbor: Radical Education Project, 1967).

¹¹ Lerner, *Fireweed: A Political Autobiography* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

¹² William Black, *Judith Shakespeare* (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1884). For more details, see my *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

¹³ The race problem in Woolf is fully examined in my *Heart of Darkness: White Women Write Race* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

¹⁴ Robinson, *Sex, Class, and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

