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Feminist Concerns in Laura Riding's "Eve's Side of It"

Introduction

Laura Jackson Riding attracts my attention for this study because her writing style challenges my level of reading comprehension and because her Eve story reminds me of Mark Twain's "Eve's Diary" covering the same topic.

Forty-one years after publication of "Eve's Side of It" (1935), Riding added a combined prologue and epilogue, titled "Commentary," to "warn readers against trying to see the story as a feminist interpretation of the Creation followed by a feminist analysis of the historical situation . . ." (548). She does not and cannot, however, forbid extrapolation of feminist issues alone. This paper, while ignoring creation history or theology, suggests several ways in which Riding's story can be seen as compatible with works of other feminist writers and theorists.

The Story

As the title implies, Riding writes this experimental narrative as a first person monologue voiced by Eve, who is expressing thoughts about her identity and connection to another being who has no physical body. Eve starts with ". . . I was someone who was being made to do certain things by someone else who was really the same person as myself—I have always called her Lilith." After an unspecified amount of time performing tasks for Lilith, Eve speaks of "a new one who is neither Lilith nor myself, yet no one else." Eve further describes her identity conundrum by saying ". . . although I feel myself

ceasing to exist, I still am. I do nothing, there is nothing more for me to do, I am no longer myself. Yet I still am. I am this new one; who is, however, not I” (544). Eve represents primordial woman, of which there can be only one. Nevertheless, her descendants share similar identity confusion. In “Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself,” author Radclyffe Hall writes about a pre-death hallucination in which “Miss Ogilvy knew that she was herself, that is to say she was conscious of her being, and yet she was not Miss Ogilvy at all, nor had she a memory of her” (196). Uncertain and difficult-to-describe self-identity is a significant theme in both stories.

Mark Twain gives us another view of Eve in his imaginative and often entertaining style. Twain’s Eve also has questions about her identity and initially guesses she exists for a certain purpose:

For I feel like an experiment, I feel exactly like an experiment, it would be impossible for a person to feel more like an experiment than I do, and so I am coming to feel convinced that that is what I am—an experiment; just an experiment, and nothing more. (20)

When referring to Adam later in the diary, Twain’s Eve calls him “the other experiment.” Like Riding, Twain does not give a patriarchal view of Eve in his story; his perspective is unique compared to other male writers of his time. One wonders if Twain, one of our most beloved American authors, might have inspired Riding to write her own Eve story.

Riding’s Eve speaks for Lilith’s identity because, having no body, Lilith cannot talk. Eve says of their shared experience, “We have both become a new one who is neither Lilith nor myself, yet no one else.” Full of speculation and doubts about which of the two is superior, Eve nevertheless prepares the reader for the rest of the story by stating “. . . I and only I, am capable of telling in so many words how it was before there

came to be a new one. For I alone was *there*” (545). This self-empowerment to tell (or write) is a desirable feminist goal promoted in 1975 by Hélène Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Cixous declares, “Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (1454). Riding’s Eve speaks to give her side of historic events concerning early man and woman.

Leading up to a discussion of men, Eve explains that Lilith created her, fully grown, as she is now. Eve reports, “Lilith made me, so far as I can make out, because she was irritated with herself.” Lilith had knowledge of future events; she knew “that there were going to be men...with hopeless ambitions and false thoughts,” but “because she was so good,” she had no ability to change those events. Perhaps Lilith also knows, women will be too marginalized and fearful to reject phallogentric behavior. “So,” Eve says, “she made me to take her place—not wanting to watch herself playing the fool all those thousands of years.” (Riding 545). Whether or not she was a god among many, or a woman precursor, Lilith adopts a passive role in the face of future man and his anticipated activities, just like poet Anne Spencer does later in her “Letter to My Sister,” beginning with:

It is dangerous for a woman to defy the gods;
 To taunt them with the tongue’s thin tip,
 Or strut in the weakness of mere humanity,
 Or draw a line daring them to cross; (260)

Eve ends her long explanation about why Lilith withdrew from direct interaction with creatures she knows will become men, by saying, “My function, which all men have misunderstood, has been to observe. And in order to observe living creatures, I too had to live” (Riding 546).

While observing man creatures before they exhibited physical bodies, Eve says, “they were merely a feeling of antagonism, or a dumb anger—a dumb, helpless anger.” From that she surmises, “Men do not really think: they make thoughts out of feelings, and you cannot make very good thoughts out of feelings.” She also notes that “. . . men can tell the truth about themselves if they keep to their feelings,” but when they try to think about other things, “the safest thing to say is: ‘I do not know’” (546). Put another way, men who express feelings when they cannot think clearly are using a form of intuition. Perhaps we can thank Riding’s Eve for hinting that reliance upon intuition did not originate with women. In her commentary following the story, Riding more pointedly contrasts intuitive feelings to thinking and declarations of truth or “reality” by historic male philosophers when she declares, “the difference is only between speedy apprehension of a little, and step-by-step accumulative apprehension of much” (550).

While waiting for man to take physical form, Eve also reports, “I talked a great deal to myself in those early days. . . Men have often wondered what women do with themselves during the time when, presumably, they are doing nothing. They are, of course talking to themselves” (Riding 546-47). Even while alone, Eve, like any person, needs to structure and organize thoughts, needs to have a sense of being in the present. Other writers, including Mark Twain, have commented about women who talk to themselves. His Eve says: “I talk all day, and in my sleep, too, and I am very interesting, but if I had another to talk to I could be twice as interesting, and would never stop, if desired” (23).

Twain’s Eve and Riding’s Eve talk to themselves also out of loneliness, and both wish for company. Having a conversational sounding board helps a woman to affirm her place in the world. One can apply the same idea to writing and the feminist literary

perspective by considering Judith Butler's comment about gaining empowerment from shared thoughts and feelings:

Indeed, the feminist impulse, and I am sure there is more than one, has often emerged in the recognition that my pain or my silence or my anger or my perception is finally not mine alone, and that it delimits me in a shared cultural situation which in turn enables and empowers me in certain unanticipated ways. (405)

Eve talks about her own "dumb anger" while waiting for men to finish evolving. Her anger, arising from fear, pushes her to believe the following: "The men who were going to be were angry with me: it was my job to be, so to speak, a chopping-block for their anger . . . So I did the dirty work. I was Lilith's eyes and ears and mouth, and then her whole body" (Riding 547). The reader is not told what the "dirty work" will be or if it will bring even more anger from men if not performed to their satisfaction. Assuming that some of that "dirty work" is about sex and gender roles, a reader may take a line of reasoning from feminist theory. In her 1982 "Feminist Manifesto," Mina Loy writes, "Men and women are enemies, with the enmity of the exploited for the parasite, the parasite for the exploited—at present they are at the mercy of the advantage that each can take of the others sexual dependence" (256). Eve, then, is experiencing enmity before men take mortal form and expects it to continue after they materialize.

Stating an additional reason for fear-driven anger, Eve is anxious "to live—to get it all over." She is "impatient for these creatures to be" and, by extension, for herself to be. After comparing her sense of anxiety to a traveler who is "not really happy until you are *there*," she reasons ". . . if you do nothing and know nothing . . . you may easily forget about yourself, and die" (Riding 547). Life without purpose or meaning, without

the means to express yourself and interact with others, is a kind of death. Prisoners in solitary confinement feel that way, and so do women who are constrained by male dominance to the point of feeling like prisoners. For modern women writers, escape from prisoner-like feelings in the literary world, according to Gilbert and Gubar, happens

. . . only because their eighteenth and nineteenth-century foremothers struggled in isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis to overcome the anxiety of authorship that was endemic to their literary subculture. (2028)

One might also describe Eve's feelings of impatience as an awakening consciousness of things to come. Adrienne Rich, in her 1971 essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as a Re-Vision," remarks, "It's exhilarating to be alive in a time of awakening consciousness; it can also be confusing, disorienting and painful" (983). Rich puts this in the context of breaking free from male writer limitations, a situation Eve has not yet experienced but seems to anticipate in a general way. At one point, Eve states, "I did not want to be hanging around with my work not even started—perhaps to die" (Riding 547). Writing or not, women want a sense of fulfillment and purpose.

Waffling back and forth over the question of dying if she does not "see the whole affair through," Eve realizes that all the many times she seemed to die during the eons of waiting, "it was just extreme tiredness" and pain brought on by repeatedly recuperating "after I have been thoroughly exhausted by men" (Riding 547). Certainly such feeling is common among wives everywhere who are exhausted by work done for the benefit of men, or who are victims of domestic abuse by men. Zora Neale Hurston expresses this in her story "Sweat," about long-suffering washer-woman Delia Jones. Delia works up

enough anger to talk back to her husband, at one point, saying, “Ah been married to you fur fifteen years, and Ah been takin’ in washin’ fur fifteen years, Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!” (350). Delia and many other woman who experience this kind of exhausted “death” eventually attempt to escape it.

In the last paragraph of the story, Riding, in Eve’s voice, finally and specifically mentions the Garden of Eden. Not wanting to continue forever in a state of anger, and wanting to “start fresh,” Eve explains the Serpent, the forbidden fruit, and how “Things had to begin *somewhere* to be somewhat as they were going to be.” She wants to give her point of view, saying, “I, for one, never had any illusions. I do not see how anyone can be either blamed or pitied who has never had any illusions.” She ends with “. . . I should not like it thought that I expected men to have my point of view about things. They are bound to feel that I led them on. Of course I led them on” (548).

Women have been stereotyped as leading men on since that fabled beginning. Still, women do perform the gender roles expected of them in order to gain benefits. An example of feminist writing on this theme is offered by Edith Wharton in “The Other Two.” Mrs. Waythorn uses her feminine wiles to mold her current husband’s attitude along with those of her previous two husbands in order to ensure her desired place in society and the comforts she hopes to maintain for herself and her daughter. By turns, Alice is compliant or aggressive as the situation requires. Mr. Waythorn realizes this as he reflects on a compliant phase:

She was “as easy as an old shoe”—a shoe that too many feet had worn. Her elasticity was the result of tension in too many different directions. Alice Haskett—Alice Varick—Alice Waythorn—she had been each in turn, and

had left hanging to each name a little of her privacy, a little of her personality, a little of the inmost self where the unknown god abides. (53)

At the end of the story, whether by calculation or by intuitive self-preservation, Alice has all three men glad to do her bidding and happy to share her company. I think, in “Eve’s Side of It,” Riding is suggesting women’s ability to “lead men on” is an attribute that cannot be suppressed and is sometimes necessary. It is nothing to apologize about.

Riding’s Commentary

Another human, sometimes-positive attribute is resistance to rules or instructions. Riding writes her 1976 dual-purpose commentary as both a prologue and an epilogue because of “. . . readers reading as they pleased, and not as they were supposed to read” (548). One can guess that she read feminist critiques that triggered her need to set the record straight. The commentary is a long-delayed attempt to convince readers of her true story-telling intentions. Riding’s effort to sway reader response toward her way of thinking may be fruitless because, as Annette Kolodny explains, “we [readers] appropriate meaning from a text according to what we need (or desire), or in other words, according to the critical assumptions or predispositions (conscious or not) that we bring to it” (304).

“When I wrote this story,” Riding comments, “I believed in the reality of stories as description of some of the unknown content of life that answers . . .” frequently asked questions that can fulfill a universal demand for long-desired knowledge. She also discusses the nature of story and how closely it reflects reality or truth: “Story is the communication of human beings to human beings of beliefs as to what the life of human beings is ‘really’ like.” She writes at length about what constitutes reality, in what context, and, “where story-telling changes naturally into truth-telling . . .” (550).

After mentioning the several narrative perspectives she uses while commenting on the story, Riding summarizes with “I think all this proves the extraordinarily live nature of story as the next-best thing to truth—when it is formed with love of it for its capability of feelable likeness to life.” She does not, however, want the reader to assume “. . . that, as author, I conceived Eve to be a spitting like of myself. . .” (551). Unlike Riding, some feminist authors do not shy away from using autobiographical content to validate a theory. Tony Morrison, for example, asks the reader to “Please forgive the use of my own work in these observations. I use it not because it provides the best example, but because I know it best, know what I did and why, and know how central these queries are to me” (1015).

Riding’s Style

In her commentary, and sometimes in the story, Laura Riding’s writing displays a complex level of lengthy sentence composition. (I frequently use ellipsis points and paraphrasing in this paper to condense longer-than-wanted quotations.) As in the jazz music genre, there seems to be a beginning and an end to the composition and it has a discernable mood or theme, but the musician plays many extraneous random-seeming notes and riffs around the edges of the melody, blurring it. An untutored listener struggles to pick out the basic tune. Here is a sample of Riding’s “sentence jazz:”

The tolerant attitude to confusion characteristic of these times is favorable to experimental procedure and thinking: there shapes itself, in the confusion, the premise, inspiring faith in experimentalism, that all procedure, and all thinking, from the beginning of thinking and procedure-devising, have been experimental, for want of the possibility of

their being otherwise, and that the best to be effected is, therefore, that which is the *most* experimental. (549)

I think this means: Currently popular trends favor experimentation. All thought and writing, by its very nature, is experimental; therefore, only currently experiments should be considered intellectually fashionable.

Riding's writing style is experimental, whether she considers herself fashionable or not. On style alone, her works can be compared to those of Mina Loy or Hélène Cixous for level of difficulty. Her "white ink" is hard to detect against the background of her supposedly not-feminist white paper.

Reading "Eve's Side of It" in multiple sessions over several hours and days leads to understanding. Parsing sentences to separate parenthetical or redundant phrases from basic subject-verb-object structure and reading aloud with varying emphasis also help to gain understanding. After total immersion, I eventually emerge with the general sense of her message, or at least what I *think* is her message.

In the Canon

Gilbert and Gubar included Laura Riding in their *Literature by Women* anthology in spite of her 1986 protestation against such action as ". . . an offense against the human identity of women." They justify their editorial decision on the evidence that Riding addresses "contemporary gender studies," in her *The Word "Woman"* publication. (542) "Eve's Side of It" was a part of that publication.

While debating whether to keep "Eve's Side of It" on the syllabus, one could argue that the writing is too difficult to comprehend. The counter-argument is we should embrace an extra-challenging opportunity to exercise close reading and critical thinking. In discussing just one Riding passage, classmates may share enough different glimmers

of interpretation to see where the author fits in the feminist genre, even if we do not grasp clear meaning of her entire story.

One could ask why we should evaluate a work that the author does not wish us to study through the lens of feminism. I believe the answer lies in acknowledgement of the passage of time and changing trends. Riding ends her 1976 commentary with a caution: “. . . let her [the new one] be just that. Do not take her out of this spiritually modest story into the raucous favor of current feminist narrative” (551). Perhaps she misunderstands feminism and that lack of understanding causes a level of fear, which promotes avoidance. The meaning of the word “feminist” has changed since Laura Riding voiced her opinion. Even today, feminists do not agree on what feminism means. The difference between Riding’s opinion and our current approach to feminism is different enough to invite investigation of her work.

I believe this story by Laura Riding belongs in the women’s literature canon and that samples of her writing, both poetry and prose, should remain on the course syllabus.

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