

The Paradox of Female Authorship in Samuel Butler's *The Authoress of the Odyssey* and Harold Bloom's *The Book of J*

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Abstract: Samuel Butler's *The Authoress of the Odyssey* and Harold Bloom's *The Book of J* both refute long-held assumptions of male authorship with respect to two of the most foundational texts to Western culture: *The Odyssey* and the book of Genesis. This essay discusses the evidence for these claims and addresses how such claims might affect the reception of these foundational works.

Samuel Butler's *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (1922) and Harold Bloom's *The Book of J* (1990) both refute long-held assumptions of male authorship with respect to two of the most foundational texts to Western culture: *The Odyssey* and the book of Genesis. While Butler's and Bloom's theories are the subject of biting criticism, none of the critics noted in this essay (with the exception of Mary Ebbott) have addressed the question of how the establishment of female authorship might affect the reception of these foundational works. Part of the problem lies in the long-standing default use of the pronoun "he" when authorship is unknown. Male authorship is reified by the consistent use of "he," eclipsing the possibility of female authorship. Hence, male authorship is established without substantial evidence while the suggestion of female authorship demands proof. This need for evidence suggests an underlying apprehension that the establishment of female authorship would not only subvert male authorship but also alienate male audiences. Thus, I propose that much of the debate regarding female authorship of *The Odyssey* and *The Book of J* hovers around the assumption that, while male authors write for universal au-

diences, female authors write for women—an assumption that implies that the underlying resistance to the suggestion of female authorship of ancient and sacred texts stems from unconscious beliefs that such claims threaten the universality of the texts, dissolving their foundational and sacred status.

Both Butler and Bloom rely on notions of “feminine” writing to substantiate their claims of female authorship, noting that the style of writing, as well as favourable references to women, set the two texts apart from *The Iliad* and *The Book of P* (another authorial voice in the book of Genesis). After interrogating *The Odyssey* and *The Book of J* for examples of style and content in support of their theories, Butler and Bloom each claim to have amassed enough evidence of female authorship to present their findings publicly. Yet their claims are ultimately impossible to prove, given the absence of historical fact. Thus, the merit of their theories is easily dismissed as fanciful. However, the arguments against the possibility of female authorship are equally unsubstantiated: in the absence of historical facts, scholars default to assumptions of male authorship without meeting the burden of proof. As Margaret Atwood explains, “[t]he assumption is that women are by nature soft, weak and not very good, and that if a woman writer happens to be good, she should be deprived of her identity as a female and provided with a higher (male) status” (197–98). In other words, theorizing about female authorship is unnecessary, since male pronouns not only supposedly encompass both male and female authors but also convey honorary male status (the “ultimate goal”) to any misrepresented female authors, rendering the revelation of their gender unnecessary. While Atwood’s discourse is reminiscent of second-wave feminism and may seem overdrawn from our perspective, she offers a useful linguistic approach to such problems. She suggests that “there is no critical vocabulary for expressing the concept ‘good/female’” (198). I offer another consideration with special attention not only to female authorship but also to female authorship of foundational and sacred works: Western culture lacks critical vocabulary for expressing the

concept “epic/female/author” and especially for expressing the concept “sacred/female/author.”

This absence of vocabulary to discuss the possibility of female authorship in *The Odyssey* and *The Book of J* is apparent in the critical response to Butler and Bloom, as few—if any—of their critics express curiosity about how such a discovery might affect the reception of these texts. Instead, their critiques focus on weaknesses in research methods, indicating that Butler and Bloom lack the necessary credentials for making their claims. Alison Booth, a literary critic writing in the 1980s, especially scorns Butler’s apparently casual approach to the translation of *The Odyssey*: “For Butler, translation was interpretive, not exact” (874). Yet, although Booth mocks Butler as one who “wears the livery of scientific investigation while serving the imagination” and who “persists in taking the absurd seriously and mocking the sacred” (866), she admits that while she is exasperated by Butler’s methods, she is unable to contradict his theories with opposing evidence (867). Bloom receives similar criticism from Robert T. Anderson in his essay “*The Book of J Speaks for Harold Bloom*.” Anderson notes that criticism of Bloom’s work is rare, perhaps because “few of us feel comfortable to comment for fear that we speak out of our ignorance of one or another dimension of his topic” (187)—such is the strength of Bloom’s reputation as a literary critic. Regardless, Anderson concludes that Bloom “doesn’t really want to do a scholarly work in either biblical studies or literary criticism and he should free himself from that task” (194). His low regard for Bloom’s analysis stems, in part, from Bloom’s study of J as a literary figure. Anderson concludes that Bloom’s comparisons of J with other literary figures such as Kafka and Shakespeare “don’t do much to illuminate either J or the cited author” (190). Moreover, of Bloom’s references to biblical scholars, Anderson remarks that “he cites the wrong scholars on the wrong issues” (191). In addition to these unflattering critiques of Bloom’s work, Anderson claims that Bloom fails to give credit to Richard Elliott Friedman, who Anderson says first suggested the possibility that J is female (188). Ultimately, Anderson ac-

knowledges Bloom's examples of the "strong affirmation" of women that substantiate much of Bloom's argument (189). However, he shows little interest in pursuing the issue of J's gender, as he believes that J is a composite of authors (194).

Despite these withering criticisms of research methods and scholastic integrity, neither Booth nor Anderson fully dispute the possibility of female authorship, the crux of Butler and Bloom's claims. Butler insists that "in *The Odyssey* things were looked at from a female point of view" and substantiates this claim by pointing out numerous occasions in which women are given preferential treatment (4). Such a moment occurs when Nausicaa tells Odysseus to "[n]ever mind my father, but go up to my mother and embrace her knees" (Homer qtd. in Butler 108). This instruction suggests that women are resourceful while men are merely figureheads. In addition to these examples, he draws attention to a concern for domestic order and "thrift," as when Penelope regrets the loss of "good meat and wine" when the tables are overturned during the slaughter of the suitors (Butler 154). In a similar vein, Bloom illuminates what he describes as the "misreading" of J that has led to misogynistic interpretations of Eve. Referring to David Rosenberg's translation of *The Book of J* (included in Bloom's book), Bloom decries the King James translation of the Hebrew "equal to him" into the English "helpmate," which portrays Eve as subordinate to Adam (179). Moreover, Bloom is adamant that J's Eve is intelligent and curious rather than sinful when she picks the forbidden fruit: "J's Hebrew implies that Adam is present, hears what the woman hears ... She is the active child ... while Adam's role is that of the child who imitates" (183). He describes the misinterpretation of this passage in Genesis as "an enormous challenge," asking with almost audible frustration, "How did the charming serpent of J ever become Satan?" (181).

Satan aside, are positive portrayals of women enough to sway the argument? According to Mary Ebbott, "Feminist criticism cannot ... continue to define women authors or readers as essentially different (in a superior way), because we can see in Butler's work how that definition easily works

the other way" (n.p.). Booth echoes Ebbott's observations, contending that Butler undermines his argument by mocking the "authoress" and thus implying that supposed flaws in *The Odyssey* are the inevitable consequence of female authorship: "[s]he loves flimsy disguises and mystifications that ... mystify nobody" (875). Similarly, in an attempt to express admiration, when Bloom describes J as "uncanny" and "tricky," he exposes her to the bitter irony of being victimized by the long-standing misreading of her own work in which Eve is blamed for the Fall (13). Thus, "uncanny" and "tricky" may connote "mysterious" and "clever" with regard to J's "essence" as a writer; however, they may also suggest "strange" and "untrustworthy" in reference to her "essence" as a woman, thereby devaluing her work. Atwood identifies this critical conundrum as a paradox in which "woman and writer are separate categories; but in any individual writer, they are inseparable" (195). In contrast, recalling the criticisms of Butler and Bloom earlier in this essay, they were never described as an inevitable consequence of being male. Rather, they were seen as a consequence of actions under specific circumstances. Thus, when male authorship is established or assumed in comparative works, differences in content and style can be discussed in literary terms. *The Book of P*, for example, can be said to have a tone of "cosmic orderliness" while *The Book of J* is "unruly" (Alter 179). However, if *The Book of J* is attributed to a female author, discussion is transposed into a socio-political inquiry; style and content (including positive references to women) can no longer be considered without deconstructing assumptions about female authorship, and indeed, about women. Hence, adjectives such as "orderly" as compared to "unruly" destabilize under not literary but socio-political divides. In this light, how might the establishment of female authorship of *The Odyssey* affect academia? Likewise, if *The Book of J* is proven to be the work of a woman, how might it be received by the Abrahamic faiths?

Ebbott imagines a cold reception. In her essay, she wonders "how the *Odyssey* would be interpreted today if Butler had succeeded in convincing the professional scholars that

it was composed by a young, unmarried woman. Would it have been subsequently neglected...? Would it define a new genre, 'women's epic'?" (n.p.). Perhaps a clue lies in the odd title of Anderson's essay, "*The Book of J Speaks for Harold Bloom*": Why does Anderson state that *The Book of J* speaks for Bloom? Is Anderson implying that Bloom has emasculated himself by suggesting that a woman, J, is the authorial voice of a sacred text? If so, his impressive rebuttal of Bloom's assertion would appear to mask an underlying resistance to this assertion that is founded on sexism rather than academic standards. Perhaps such a fear is derived from a belief that, while a male voice is universal and may speak for women, a woman's voice, a voice that speaks for women only, is inherently subversive and marginalizes male audiences to the role of onlooker or bystander. Hence, Anderson's sarcasm does implicate the way in which the establishment of female authorship would affect the reception of *The Book of J*: through suspicion. Thus, the paradox of female authorship is revealed; a female author of such texts can only sustain the admiration that she deserves if her gender remains unknown, overshadowed by the pronoun "he."

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