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1995

**Review of *Isolation and Masquerade: Willa Cather's Women* By Frances W. Kaye and *Willa Cather* By Sharon O'Brien**

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Faderman, Lillian, "Review of *Isolation and Masquerade: Willa Cather's Women* By Frances W. Kaye and *Willa Cather* By Sharon O'Brien" (1995). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1052.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Isolation and Masquerade: Willa Cather's Women.* By Frances W. Kaye. American University Studies, series XXIV, American Literature, vol. 30. New York: Peter Lang, 1993. Introduction, notes, index. 204 pp. \$43.95.

*Willa Cather.* By Sharon O'Brien. Lives of Notable Gay Men and Lesbians, ed. Martin Duberman. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1995. Introduction, preface, Cather bibliography, further reading, chronology, index. 144 pp. \$9.95 paper.

In her introduction to *Isolation and Masquerade* Frances Kaye immediately establishes her disagreement with Sharon O'Brien's views of Willa Cather as they appear in O'Brien's 1987 work, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*. O'Brien's 1995 book was written for the Chelsea House young adult Gay Men and Lesbians series, but though this work, unlike the 1987 book, takes the writer into her last days, O'Brien's perspective on Cather's accomplishments is essentially no different from what she has already revealed; so, we can be certain that Kaye's disagreements would also apply to O'Brien's more recent efforts. Two more different views of a single subject are unimaginable.

Kaye explains that her purpose in writing *Isolation and Masquerade* was to pin down what she has always found "discomforting—and finally profoundly distasteful" in Willa Cather's writing: what Kaye characterizes as Cather's "sense that the concerns of ordinary women, heterosexual or homosexual, are not valid and do not deserve to be voiced" (p. 188). Kaye wishes to demonstrate that Cather saw herself as separate from other women, both in terms of her lesbianism and her role as an artist. Her self-isolation was unfortunate for Cather herself, Kaye believes, because it involved psychic costs; but even worse, its results, as

manifested in her work, are dangerous for readers. Kaye complains that Cather asks the female reader to identify with Alexandra and repudiate heterosexual passion; to identify with Thea and repudiate the concerns of other women. Even lesbian readers can be led astray by Cather, Kaye believes, when they are asked to identify with Jim Burden and stand by helplessly as a loved woman is lost to a heterosexist society. Hence, all women readers are forced to pay "psychic and social costs" (p. 187) if they are seduced by Cather's work.

One of the primary goals of *Isolation and Masquerade*, consequently, is to caution readers of Cather. Kaye is interested not in analyzing Cather's successes but rather their costs. She desires to reveal Cather's "masquerade"—her duplicity in refusing to name the lesbianism that is central to her work—and to show how feminist readers have been misguided in their view of Cather's heroines as "exemplary." Kaye's book takes Cather and her work to task for anti-feminism, male-identification, woman-hating, social fascism, and a host of related contagions.

One of Kaye's most salient points is that Cather can hardly be a feminist ideal because she modelled herself on men: Kaye characterizes Cather as being "like many twentieth-century lesbians who had only male definitions of self to model personal, economic, and artistic independence upon" (p. 5). While Cather's rejection of the traditional roles of women may have been liberating for her, Kaye states, it also involved rejection of the women who filled those roles and, equally damaging, rejection of the woman in herself. Kaye suggests that Cather did not believe a real woman could be an artist, and she reads *The Song of the Lark* as a novel whose major theme proposes that the woman must be immolated before the artist can be born. Cather presents no model for autonomy other than a masculine one, Kaye

complains, and within that model women are devalued.

Not only does Cather banish women from the Kingdom of Art, according to Kaye, but she is entirely incapable of portraying the "ordinary heterosexual woman." Under Cather's pen such a character becomes either an obtuse whiner or a saintly angel in the house. Kaye deems that false vision of womanhood to be "not unusual in twentieth-century lesbian literature or theory" and refers to the lesbian works of other twentieth-century writers, from Jane Rule to self-published and underground authors, who "reject the validity of any kind of heterosexual feminism" (p. 119).

Kaye is also troubled by what she sees as a fascistic strain in Cather's antifeminism. She characterizes Cather as a disciple of Carlyle, whose philosophy taught her not only to admire the "hero," the exceptional individual, over the common man (or woman), but also to loathe any proposal to ameliorate society by organizing people in groups—especially if such organization threatened to limit the individual's conduct. Cather thus rejected the organized women's movement and any medium of mass pressure necessary to procure suffrage and other political rights for women. But Kaye attributes even baser motives to Cather's antipathy toward suffragism. Cather "did not wish to see women empowered," Kaye speculates, because "the male establishment that feminists challenged was one that had given Cather a secure and honored place" (p. 118).

A further reason Cather could not work with other women, Kaye insists, was because she felt above them—she isolated herself, and that isolation is reflected in her characters. Her heroines generally operate without female friends. Kaye uses *O Pioneers!* to illustrate the point while also showing how emotionally unsatisfying that novel is: not only does Cather portray the destructiveness of all heterosexual love, she also closes off the possibility of a satisfying friendship between women that could survive the turbulence wrought by heterosexuality. Thus *O Pioneers!* may be an affirmative book in its portrait of the land, Kaye

contends, but it offers "a narrowing vision of humankind" (p. 50).

One can only conclude from Kaye's book that the early twentieth-century lesbian had no business writing fiction since she wrote under cover of masquerade and thus deceived. But, of course, no lesbian could have written openly about lesbians and expected to be published throughout much of the era when Cather was writing. In 1928, fully fifteen years after the publication of *O Pioneers!*, Radclyffe Hall finally dared to write as a lesbian: her book was banned in England and almost banned in America. And even if Cather had not had to worry about such censorship, she would have seen that to write openly as a lesbian in the early twentieth century would have placed impossible limitations on her: she would have been constrained, as was Hall, to write defensively, not about human desire and striving and joyous achievement and the misery of failure, but about the "reasons" for and the "agony" of "sexual abnormality," a horrifyingly limited subject for a writer capable of revealing the human soul. Cather knew that if she wanted to be a serious writer she simply had to hide the fact that she was a lesbian.

Kaye suggests that Cather deceives her readership by a two-fold masquerade. First of all, as an author, she is a lesbian masquerading as a "normal" woman who could have insight into other heterosexuals; but her characters too are necessarily masquerades, because what she knows best is the lesbian psyche. Therefore, Jim Burden, for example, is really a lesbian; and his/her fate is disingenuously depicted: the reason "Jim" is doomed to frustration in "his" love for *Ántonia* is *really* because *Ántonia* is heterosexual. But if we follow Kaye's line of reasoning, an author can *never* successfully create characters he or she is not: Brontë's Heathcliff and Tolstoy's Anna must be as suspect as Tennessee Williams's Blanche or Romeo and Juliet by Shakespeare (that gay sonneteer).

If Sharon O'Brien had not primarily repeated in *Willa Cather* the ideas she discussed in her 1987 book one might almost think the

more recent work a response to Kaye. While Kaye's purpose seems to be to caution the reader to Cather's limitations stemming from her emotional life, O'Brien wishes to show the strengths that Cather garnered—and could thus invest in her writing—as a result of her emotional life. O'Brien's readership is, of course, young adult lesbians and gays; but since she suggests nothing substantively different here from what she said in her mainstream book, we may assume that her depiction of Cather as generous, emotionally solid, loving, and happy is not constructed simply to create a role model for young lesbians and gays but is rather her genuine take on Cather.

O'Brien considers the same evidence important to Kaye but reads it very differently. For instance, O'Brien too depicts Cather's masculine identity as a girl, her childhood scorning of the "namby-pamby" females in *Little Women* and her empathy with the heroes of *Captains Courageous* and *Treasure Island* who possessed the autonomy she wanted for herself. But O'Brien then points out not only the polarization of gender roles in Victorian America when Cather was growing up, but also the important connection between Cather's early gender transgressions and her becoming a creative and original writer: she was willing to transgress boundaries and enter territory where women weren't supposed to go. Her masculine identity during her college years was less connected with her lesbianism, as Kaye suggests, than with her realistic perception in the late nineteenth century that society did not permit feminine women to become serious artists. As O'Brien points out, Cather dropped that masculine identity while still in her twenties, when she became more secure about her abilities.

O'Brien shows what Cather was able to do in her creation of the woman hero as a result of her own learning about what was valuable and what was dispensable in androgyny. Alexandra, O'Brien points out, integrates conventionally masculine and feminine qualities without being male identified: "In Alexandra, Cather gives us a model of strength that re-

flects her own move from male identification to acceptance of her womanhood," O'Brien observes, "a womanhood separated from the dominant culture's definition of the feminine as submissive and domestic" (pp. 98-99). Alexandra is powerfully female, and it was Cather's experience with both power and femaleness that led to her creation.

O'Brien depicts not only a distinctly different literary output but a different Willa Cather from Kaye's characterization. Kaye accuses Cather of being man-hating. O'Brien discusses her love for a young Mexican named Julio during a stay in the Southwest and hints at Cather's bisexuality. Kaye sees Cather as being cold. O'Brien depicts her writing warm letters to the fans who wrote to her, encouraging other women writers just as she had been encouraged by Sarah Orne Jewett, and concerning herself with the needs of young college women. Kaye says that Cather was not only elitist but racist as well. O'Brien focuses on Cather's interest in Native Americans, and especially Native American women who were a source of inspiration for Cather because, as the novelist put it, "under conditions of incredible difficulty and fear of enemies [they] had still designed and molded . . . beautiful objects for daily use out of river bottom clay" (p. 93).

For my most recent book, *Chloe Plus Olivia*, an anthology of lesbian literature, I attempted to procure a poem entitled "Evening on Lesbos," by Edna St. Vincent Millay, whose bisexual experiences are documentable. Her literary executrix refused to grant permission for me to use the poem. Naturally I was puzzled and angry, assuming that in our own progressive, sophisticated era surely no author can be damaged because she is associated with lesbianism. Millay's executrix is living in another age, I thought, in the 1920s perhaps when writers like Amy Lowell fell from fame because critics like Clement Wood wrote, shortly after Lowell's death in 1925, that her poetry did not "word a common cry of many hearts" because she was a lesbian, and while "she may well be laureate of as many as stand beside

her," heterosexual readers would find nothing of value in her work. I am rethinking my annoyance with Millay's literary executrix. Perhaps she was merely being realistic in assuming that attitudes like Clement Wood's are still with us. Perhaps Cather was also merely being realistic by attempting to hide whatever evidence she could of her lesbianism, even from posterity. Cather and Millay's executrix both assumed that the fact of lesbianism would loom so large once it were known that critics would have difficulty in seeing anything else in a writer's work, and—in a homophobic society—the work would be diminished. Now that knowledge of Cather's lesbianism has become widespread it will be a tremendous challenge, especially for heterosexual critics, to read her work fairly, without prejudice, and to judge it on its merits rather than on the imagined personal limitations of its author.

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