
Carol Hanbery MacKay. *Creative Negativity. Four Victorian Exemplars of the Female Quest*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. 275p.

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With this study MacKay presents her research of women artist figures during mid- and late 19th-century England, a time regarded as highly reactionary, prejudiced, repressive, and rigid. As widely documented, the life of women was not exactly an enviable one during the Victorian era, as they were generally boxed up into clearly defined roles befitted their “inferior” gender. Nonetheless, the author found “in the midst of a sexist, racist, imperialistic culture . . . covert revolutionaries” (xi), MacKay states, four women who challenged and advanced the social roles put upon them. MacKay’s analysis of these “radicals” draws upon the lives and works of photographer and poet Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-1879); the writer Anne Thackeray Ritchie (1837-1919); the political activist and spiritual leader Anne Wood Besant (1847-1933); and actress-writer Elizabeth Robins (1862-1952). While all four women were prominent, popular figures in their own time, today they are virtually forgotten and absent from academic research. Yet, they attained remarkable achievements, and MacKay’s book intends to resurrect their life works by demonstrating how these four early feminists operated with and within the system during a key period of history.

It becomes quickly apparent that MacKay is well familiar with her subject matter. Over the last fifteen years, she has extensively published on all four women, yet her book is far from a mere summary of her earlier research. Here, for the first time, MacKay tries to bring together the creative endeavors of these four artists through a theoretical framework that the author coins “creative negativity,” the fundamental nature of the female quest. In the first chapter MacKay introduces the reader to her theory about the term “creative negativity” and her understanding of the “female quest.” Creative negativity constitutes “a complex of rhetorical and performative techniques by which certain women of the period construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct themselves” in order to step outside the structure of a defined existence. Creative negativity is essentially divided into six interacting elements, MacKay notes: “(1) it grows out of *negativity*, either philosophical or emotional; (2) it evokes a *focal point*, often a place; (3) it combines *reality and illusion*; (4) it suggests a shift in *magnitude*, a sense of multifariousness or zooming out; (5) it includes an altered sense of *time*; and (6) it evokes *self-referentiality*, an aesthetic of formal invocation in a work of art, a sense of self-consciousness in social contexts” (3). Born out of suppressed or repressed nega-

tive emotions, the main objective of creative negativity is a crossing of societal and/or emotional boundaries.

MacKay clarifies the “female quest” by comparing and contrasting it to the male quest. The prototype of the male quest in the Western tradition, MacKay writes, can be characterized as such: typically portrayed is a single individual who seeks a distant, often inaccessible goal. His search proceeds logically and chronologically in tandem with the linearity of time and space. The male questor is ultimately concerned only with his own persona and separates and distances himself from a clearly defined “other.” The female quest, unlike the male quest, is communal and collaborative in nature. It is chiefly governed by the two principles of separation as well as unity, and it usually is not one individual’s quest alone. Generally, the female quest does not present a chronological experience as it is never-ending. It is often driven by illusion, i.e. the imaginative material necessary for the creation and recreation of reality itself. Thus, the female quest constitutes both a response and an approach to empiric reality, with the fundamental goal of redefining women’s roles and accomplishments.

With her theoretical frame in place, MacKay proceeds to develop her argument in the following four chapters, each chapter assigned to one of her four subjects. The first chapter focuses on the photographer Julia Margaret Cameron whose lively and revealing portraits have preserved for us the features of the most renowned members of the Victorian intelligentsia. Nowadays, we consider Cameron a pioneer in the field of photography, but in her own time she was rejected at first for her lack of technical know-how. Cameron reversed the prevailing aesthetic in photography using a large camera, wet plates, and five-minute exposures. The results were visionary images full of symbolic meaning that brought underlying hidden nuances to life. Undermining the viewer’s sense of reality and coherence, Cameron sought to deconstruct and recreate the paradigm of individuality and identity of self. While Cameron photographed both men and women, it is her photography of female models that capture her creative vision. Cameron frequently portrayed women as seemingly pensive, self-absorbed, and unconscious of their surroundings. Yet, through the subjects’ demeanor these portraits also hint at internal tension and turmoil, and so provide us with an almost disturbing insight into the female psyche. With these images, Cameron invoked and explored “issues and stages of femininity and femaleness” (35), utilizing her photography as a creative response to the gender issues of her Victorian time.

While Cameron shot pictures to bring women’s issues to light, Anne Thackeray Ritchie used the art of writing to fight against gender disparity. Daughter of novelist William Makepeace Thackeray, she learned about contemporary social and

political concerns through the vast circle of friends and acquaintances in her father's house. Among them were Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Jane Carlyle, and Julia Margaret Cameron, women who not only acted as surrogate mothers to the motherless child, but also introduced the young Anne to the significance of strong as well as articulate femaleness. Ritchie's opus is a collection of small published works: magazine articles, serialized novels, and essays. She wrote about women in a way that she critically examined their existence and struggle for identity, inviting the reader to look carefully at society's suppression of women's voices and needs.

MacKay's chapter on Annie Wood Besant highlights the fact that the pursuit of helping others often starts with the search for one's own self. Besant was a problematic figure in her native England, because she openly questioned and eventually broke from the Anglican Church "to become an atheist, a Freethinker, a Neo-Malthusian, and then a Fabian Socialist" (96). In 1889, Besant became a member of the worldwide social and mystical movement known as Theosophy that attracted such artist figures as William Butler Yeats and Wassily Kandinsky. Besant's life was dedicated to promoting political, social, and spiritual reforms. She headed the Theosophical Society for over forty years, moved to India, where in 1918 she was elected the first woman president of India's National Congress. Her work is testimony to her lifetime of conversions and deconversions, of constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing her identity as a woman.

An unpublished biography of Annie Besant was penned by Elizabeth Robins, the subject of MacKay's penultimate chapter. Robins, an American citizen, spent most of her adult life in England, where she not only performed and directed other women, but also wrote drama and fiction. Robins was a productive and astute collaborator, working together with such notable males as Ibsen, Archer, Shaw, and Oscar Wilde. As a spokesperson for the women's movement, she showed the good sense to work well with others, thus decimating negativity and opposition through networking and transcending boundaries. As a woman of the performing arts and a feminist, Robins created new forms of expression, uniting politics and arts, ideology and aesthetics, to overcome separation and to construct union from calculated and seeming opposites. Robins "collaborative-communal model in all things," MacKay asserts, "still stands today as the ideal that feminist networking only begins to approach" (171).

In the final chapter of the book MacKay briefly explores some remaining aspects of creative negativity and the female quest by other authors that substantiate her thesis. She concludes by pointing towards American women artists that are still in need of a substantial discussion of their works. All in all, MacKay's book

deserves applause for her thoroughly researched and multifaceted depiction of Victorian female creativity. Like her female subjects, MacKay crosses formal and structural boundaries by drawing upon the fields of fine arts, psychology, comparative religion, drama, history, as well as literary and gender issues to present us with this insightful, informative, eloquent, and captivating mine of information.