

Searching for the Middle Ground: Finding Balance in Literary Extremes

Leslie Harris

Taoism, also known as Daoism, is a Chinese school of thought which originated during the fourth century B.C., encouraging its followers to “seek harmony with nature and with other human beings through a simple life” (“Daoism”). This philosophy is based on the concept of the *Tao*, which is “an original Oneness in things, an eternal underlying foundation of being, from which the many parts of the universe continuously spring and into which they continuously return” (“Daoism”). Tao, also known as “the Way” or “the path,” transcends opposites and categories; Taoist thinkers believe in searching for the middle ground that exists between illusory opposites (Tzu 557). Taoist principles, such as that of “the Way,” and thought patterns, found in the Taoist book, the *Chuang Tzu*, can be applied to the interpretation of *Gilgamesh* and *The Oxford Book of Late Medieval Verse and Prose*, cross-cultural literary works which present women in the two extremes mentioned in Gilbert and Gubar’s essay, “The Madwoman in the Attic.”

Two opposites and extremes are presented by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their essay, “The Madwoman in the Attic.” Discussing the portrayal of women in various literary works, Gilbert and Gubar’s thesis is that “a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster,’ which male authors have generated for her” (Gilbert and Gubar 812). These two definitions of women, which are imposed by men, give women no freedom of self-definition in the literary world. Female writers are more or less challenged to search for the middle ground in female literary personalities. The thesis of “The Madwoman in the Attic” is very much a Taoist mode of thought; Gilbert and Gubar are stressing the importance of finding a balance between portraying and interpreting females and female personas as good or evil, “angels” or “monsters.”

Exemplifying the thesis of Gilbert and Gubar, *The Oxford Book of Late Medieval Verse and Prose*, edited by Douglas Gray, contains several lyric poems written in Middle English, portraying Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, as an “angel,” or a woman of complete virtue. For example, the poet in “Adam Lay Ibounden” rationalizes Adam’s taking of the infamous apple, because if he had not eaten it, then “Ne hadde never our Lady a ben hevene qwen” (Gray 161). This line translated into modern English means that, without the fall of Adam, Mary would have never become the queen of heaven because Christ’s birth would not have been necessary.

The poems “I Sing of a Maiden” and “The Rose that bore Jesu” also categorize Mary as an “angel.” In “I Sing of a Maiden,” Mary is first referred to as “makeles,” meaning that she is a spotless virgin (Gray 161). The poem culminates with the lines, “Moder and maydyn was never non but che --/ Wel may swych a lady Godes moder be” (Gray 161). Translated into modern English, these lines state that Mary is the only woman who was both a mother and a maiden, and it is appropriate that such a woman was the mother of Christ (Gray 161).

“The Rose that bore Jesu,” which refers to Mary as a rose in its very title, further characterizes Mary as a saint or “angel” by referring to her as the medium through which people may discover God and the trinity (Gray 163). The characterization of Mary in each of these poems represents the epitome of Gilbert and Gubar’s thesis; Mary is viewed as one-sided. She is seen as a woman solely of virtue; based on these poems alone, readers would not conclude that a “monster” or any type of evil nature existed in Mary. Therefore, we can conclude that Mary is an excellent example of one literary extreme; she represents the eternal goodness of woman.

Another literary work that categorizes women as an extreme is the ancient Middle-Eastern epic poem, *Gilgamesh*. Called “the first great heroic narrative of world literature,” *Gilgamesh* was written over a period of approximately one thousand years, and the “earliest written versions of

these stories date from roughly 2000 B.C." ("Gilgamesh" 10-11). In "The Coming of Enkidu," an initial chapter in the epic, a harlot with an ulterior motive is a primary character: "She was not ashamed to take him; she made herself naked and welcomed his eagerness;" this woman was working with a trapper in an effort to civilize Enkidu ("Gilgamesh" 15).

Through a sexual relationship, the harlot guaranteed that the animals of the field would then reject Enkidu, and he would be forced to come to the city ("Gilgamesh" 15). Therefore, the harlot in *Gilgamesh* represents the extreme of a "monster" similar to that which Gilbert and Gubar refer. The harlot is a "monster" because she is portrayed as assertive and aggressive, which are "characteristics of a male life," that, "are 'monstrous' in women" (Gilbert and Gubar 819). This interpretation allows the reader to recognize that even in one of the first narrative epics, women were categorized just as Gilbert and Gubar theorize in their essay, "The Madwoman in the Attic."

Where does the reader go from here? Can distinctions be made between an "angel" and a "monster" in such a way that women are interpreted as neither one nor the other? How do the principles and beliefs of Taoism apply to the interpretation of women in the literary works above, which cross cultures and centuries?

The answer to these questions can be found through an abstract interpretation of the work of Chuang Chou, a primary Taoist thinker and author. In his chapter from the *Chuang Tzu*, "Discussion on Making All Things Equal," Chuang Chou writes, "And someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream. Yet the stupid believe they are awake, busily and brightly assuming they understand things" (564). Chou then concludes his essay with the following anecdote:

Once Chuang Chou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Chuang Chou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Chuang Chou. But he didn't know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou. Between Chuang Chou and a butterfly there must be *some* distinction! (Chou 565).

Chuang Tzu was very aware of the fact that opposites are illusions; it is obvious through his writing that this Taoist thinker placed high value on perception and understanding.

How, though, does this awareness of perception relate to literary interpretation? Chuang Chou makes a critical point in his writing. Chou writes, "This is all a great dream," meaning that there is an alternate perception of any reality and that the only thing missing is an audience to provide that interpretation (564). But who decides what is real and what is illusion? Where is the "middle ground" between the two?

In the example Chuang Chou provides above, regarding the dream that he is a butterfly, Chou awakens the reader to further possibilities. To decide whether he was actually a butterfly or a man, Chou noted that differences or distinctions must exist between the two (565). Making such distinctions means more than deciding upon literal definitions; Chou is referring to a matter of interpretation. How can he decide what is a man and what is a butterfly? Chuang Chou's goal in this excerpt is to point out that multiple perceptions of reality exist and that any one perception may be correct or incorrect.

Chuang Chou's aforementioned quote helps to clarify this issue: "Yet the stupid believe they are awake, busily and brightly assuming they understand things" (564). Here is the crux of the application of Taoist perspectives to literary analysis. For interpretation to occur, whether of female roles in literature or any other topic of interest, and for a "middle ground" to be reached from two extreme viewpoints, a reader or interpreter must be open to multiple perspectives, willing to accept

viewpoints that differ from his or her own, and able to recognize the fact that his or her assessment is not the only one in existence.

People who approach literary interpretation and analysis with closed minds are like the stupid people Chuang Chou refers to, holding the false belief that they are able to understand everything (564). A Taoist would argue that it is impossible to understand everything because in essence, everything cannot be understood. Only through this acknowledgement and the idea that all perception is subjective can a "middle ground" be reached.

With this mode of thinking, one is open to the possibility that Mary, mother of Jesus, was not completely "angelic." Perhaps she was; however, Taoist ideals encourage the reader to consider the possibility that she was not an "angel," and because of such consideration, it is likely that a universal truth will be discovered about the female persona. Women defy categorization as polar opposites on any spectrum. Likewise, the harlot in *Gilgamesh* proves not to be a complete "monster" if the reader is open to multiple interpretations of her actions and her character. For example, the outcomes of the harlot's actions were undoubtedly positive; she enabled Enkidu to meet Gilgamesh, to offer him companionship, and to stop the reckless violence that was being committed in Uruk ("Gilgamesh" 15-17). It is up to the reader, then, to decide if the harlot is a "monster" or simply an "angel" in disguise.

Therefore, Taoist principles are helpful when applied to literary interpretation. Approaching any literary work from this perspective will transcend the literary stereotypes which Gilbert and Gubar wrote about in "The Madwoman in the Attic," and which were exemplified in both the examined Medieval and Middle-Eastern literary works. Taoist thought patterns can be a useful tool in literary interpretation; instead of classifying literary works, themes, or characters, readers should challenge themselves to consider alternate perceptions regardless of genre.

Works Cited

- Chou, Chuang. "Chuang Tzu: Discussion On Making All Things Equal." *The Norton Anthology: World Masterpieces*. Ed. Maynard Mack. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997. 555-565.
- "Daoism." Microsoft Encarta. 14 Nov. 2005 <<http://encarta.msn.com>>.
- Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. "The Madwoman in the Attic." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. 2nd. ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004. 812-825.
- "Gilgamesh." *The Norton Anthology: World Masterpieces*. Ed. Maynard Mack. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997. 13-41.
- Gray, Douglas, ed. *The Oxford Book of Late Medieval Verse and Prose*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. 160-169.