



The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980

By Elaine Showalter

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In this informative, timely and often harrowing study, Elaine Showalter demonstrates how cultural ideas about 'proper' feminine behaviour have shaped the definition and treatment of female insanity for 150 years, and given mental disorder in women specifically sexual connotations. Along with vivid portraits of the men who dominated psychiatry, and descriptions of the therapeutic practices that were used to bring women 'to their senses', she draws on diaries and narratives by inmates, and fiction from Mary Wollstonecraft to Doris Lessing, to supply a cultural perspective usually missing from studies of mental illness. Highly original and beautifully written, *The Female Malady* is a vital counter-interpretation of madness in women, showing how it is a consequence of, rather than a deviation from, the traditional female role.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Showalter, well known for her feminist studies of literature, here turns her attention to the history of psychiatry. Approaches to treatment have ranged from kindly paternalism to repressive discipline to psychosurgery to drugs. They have this in common: The treatments are devised by men and inflicted, predominantly, on women. She finds one exception, and a fascinating parallel, in the shell-shocked soldiers of World War I. Men in war, experiencing powerlessness, responded with hysterical-like women. The doctors' response was to treat them like women. Showalter presents a moving, troubling history and a strong, surely controversial, argument drawing on literature and art as well as on case histories. Only feminist psychiatric theory and practice, she concludes, offer hope for change. The book is eloquently written and accessible to general and scholarly readers. Highly recommended. Mary Drake McFeely, Smith Coll. Lib., Northampton, Mass.

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Review

She writes with penetration, precision and passion. This book is essential reading for all those concerned with what psychiatry has done to women, and what new psychiatry could do for them ROY PORTER, WELLCOME INSTITUTE FOR THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE

About the Author

Elaine Showalter was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1941. From 1967 to 1984 she taught English and Women's Studies at Rutgers University, and she now chairs the department of English at Princeton University.

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