

Sandra M. Gilbert, Co-Author of 'The Madwoman in the Attic,' Dies at 87

A poet, scholar and literary critic, she turned a feminist lens on 19th-century writers like Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, creating a feminist classic.



Sandra Gilbert in 2013. She wrote eight books of poetry but was best known for her academic work focusing on female writers. Credit...Alison Harris

By [Penelope Green](#)

Sandra M. Gilbert, a critic, scholar, poet and co-author of “The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination,” a groundbreaking work of literary criticism that became a feminist classic, died on Nov. 10 in Berkeley, Calif. She was 87.

Her death, in a hospital, was caused by end-stage chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, her son, Roger Gilbert, said.

“Is a pen a metaphorical penis?” Certainly male writers thought it was. And if so, wondered Ms. Gilbert and [Susan Gubar](#), her co-author, in their introduction to “The Madwoman in the Attic,” first published in 1979, where did that leave women? “With what organ can females generate texts?”

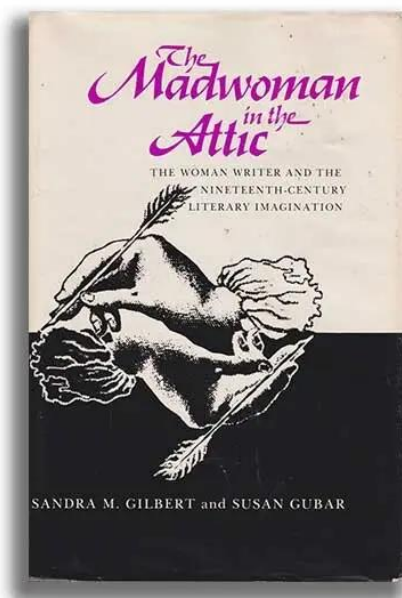
With gusto, scholarly rigor and flashes of humor, the authors dug into the macho ethos that had long dominated literature, casting women as either sickly saints or unhinged shrews,

and female writers as intellectual lightweights — the “lady authors” and “poetesses” that Nathaniel Hawthorne once decried as “a damned mob of scribbling women.”

Their breakthrough was to uncover the narrative strategies that Mary Shelley, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Emily Dickinson and others deployed to gain literary autonomy and to protest an oppressive literary patriarchy.

The madwomen and harridans of Brontë, Austen and others were proxies for the authors’ own rage and rebellion, Ms. Gilbert and Ms. Gubar declared. So, too, was Shelley’s “Frankenstein”: her monster, herself.

“Even the most apparently conservative and decorous women writers obsessively create fiercely independent characters who seek to destroy all the patriarchal structures which both their authors and their authors’ submissive heroines seem to accept as inevitable,” Ms. Gilbert and Ms. Gubar wrote. “The madwoman in literature by women is not merely, as she might be in male literature, an antagonist or foil to the heroine. Rather she is usually in some sense the author’s double, an image of her own anxiety and rage.”



Ms. Gilbert’s first book, written with Susan Gubar, was published in 1979. “The authors force us to take a new look at the grandes dames of English literature,” one critic wrote, “and the result is that they will never seem quite the same again.”Credit...Mad Woman

The book became a feminist blockbuster, joining second-wave feminist classics like [Kate Millet](#)’s “Sexual Politics” (1970) and Elaine Showalter’s “[A Literature of Their Own](#): British

Women Novelists From Brontë to Lessing” (1977), which traced the legacy of gender discrimination in the arts.

“Like gnostic heretics who claim to have found the secret code that unlocks the mysteries in old texts,” [Le Anne Schreiber](#) wrote in [her review](#) for The New York Times, “the authors force us to take a new look at the grandes dames of English literature, and the result is that they will never seem quite the same again.”

Ms. Gilbert and Ms. Gubar were newly minted English professors when they met in the elevator at Indiana University in 1973. Ms. Gilbert was a published poet; Ms. Gubar had just earned her doctorate. They bonded as New Yorkers adrift in the Midwest.

Ms. Gilbert’s specialty was 20th-century literature, and Ms. Gubar’s, the 18th century, but they decided to teach the books they had always loved but had never studied in school: classics by women of the 19th and 20th centuries.

They thought of calling their course Upstairs, Downstairs, but settled on *The Madwoman in the Attic*, in homage to the madwoman who haunts Brontë’s “Jane Eyre,” otherwise known as the first Mrs. Rochester. The patterns that began to emerge as they taught those works — what they described as a distinct feminine imagination and literary tradition — were thrilling to them.

“It felt like discovering an uncharted country,” Ms. Gubar said by phone.

A few years later, they took on “The Norton Anthology,” that staple of college freshman English. Their contribution, “The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women,” out in 1985, was a marathon endeavor, a 2,457-page doorstop spanning seven centuries that reviewers praised as a landmark not just in feminism but in the study of literature.

Ms. Gilbert and Ms. Gubar included the work of [Margery Kempe](#), a contemporary of Chaucer’s, who wrote longingly of celibacy after bearing 14 children — “the debt of matrimony was so abominable to her that she would rather, she thought, have eaten or drunk the ooze and the muck in the gutter than consent to any fleshly communing” — as well as Kate Chopin’s novel “*The Awakening*,” pearls from Dorothy Parker and selections from contemporary writers like Alice Walker and Audre Lorde.



Ms. Gilbert, left, and Ms. Gubar around 1980. In 1986, Ms. Magazine named them Women of the Year. Credit...via Gilbert Family

“To feminist scholars,” Laura Shapiro wrote in Newsweek magazine, “it’s been obvious for years that the academic establishment would far rather spoon up the muck and ooze from the gutter than redefine the canon of important literature to include women writers.”

In 1986, Ms. Magazine named Ms. Gilbert and Ms. Gubar Women of the Year.

The pair saw “The Madwoman in the Attic” as the first part of a more complete cultural history of women’s literature. At that point, they had yet to tackle the 20th century. They did so in a three-volume set, “No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century,” publishing the final volume in 1994. Janet Gezari, writing in The Boston Globe, called it “a lively companion to the literature of the period.”

If you count “No Man’s Land” as a single work, together Ms. Gilbert and Ms. Gubar produced nearly 10 significant works of scholarship, give or take, over five decades. (They were the Lennon and McCartney of academia, but without the breakup or the rancor.) It was a collaboration conducted at first by long-distance telephone calls and the mail, because Ms. Gilbert left Indiana after two years to join the English department at the University of California, Davis.

Their most recent book, “Still Mad: American Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination” (2021), was written in the wake of Hillary Clinton’s loss to Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election, and it scooped up authors from Sylvia Plath and Toni Morrison to Alison Bechdel, among many others. “If the culture is still changing,” they wrote in the introduction, “why are we and so many of our friends still mad?”

They added: “Maybe if you shatter glass ceilings, you have to walk on broken glass. Maybe if you lean in, you topple over.”

Yet their favorite collaboration, Ms. Gubar said, was “Masterpiece Theatre: An Academic Melodrama” (1995), a play that spoofed academia and the culture wars. It involved a stolen text, an English professor named Jane Marple who sets out to rescue the text, and a motley cast of characters — including William Bennett, Ronald Reagan’s secretary of education; [Robert Bly](#), the drumbeating poet and author; and [Jacques Derrida](#), the French deconstructionist — all corralled on a train called the Euro-Centric Express. They often performed the play live at conferences.

The ongoing culture wars were easy to poke fun at, but their origins were perhaps more cynical, addressing a successful strategy of the conservative playbook, as Ms. Gilbert and Ms. Gubar wrote, that involved diverting “attention from the ills of society while dividing and conquering a confused public by scapegoating a small group of academics for problems over which the group had little or no control.”

Sandra Ellen Mortola was born on Dec. 27, 1936, in New York City. Her mother, Angela (Caruso) Mortola, was a public-school teacher; her father, Alexis Joseph Mortola, was a civil engineer.

Sandra grew up in Jackson Heights, Queens, and attended Hunter College High School, in Manhattan. She earned her bachelor’s degree in English literature from Cornell University, where she met Elliot Gilbert, then a Ph.D. student; they married in 1957. After a year in Germany, where her husband served in the Army, the couple returned to New York. There, she earned a master’s degree from New York University and a Ph.D. from Columbia, both in English literature.

Ms. Gilbert retired from U.C. Davis in 2005 as a distinguished professor emerita. In 2012, she and Ms. Gubar won the National Book Critics Circle [lifetime achievement](#) award.

“People forget that, when they were writing, even to talk about women writers as having anything in common, as having a story of their own, as being connected in any way to each other, was incredibly controversial,” Katha Pollitt, the feminist author, told The Washington Post in 2013. “Now it seems completely obvious.”

In addition to her son, Ms. Gilbert is survived by her daughters, Katherine Gilbert-O’Neil and Susanna Gilbert; four grandchildren; and her partner, Dick Frieden. Mr. Gilbert died in 1991, at 60, during what had been billed as a routine procedure: surgery to remove a cancerous prostate gland.

Ms. Gilbert set out to investigate the cause of his death, which was not a heart attack, as the surgeon told her, but from bleeding out in the recovery room, an outcome a simple blood test would have prevented. [“Wrongful Death: A Medical Tragedy” \(1995\)](#) is her memoir of that experience, her attempt to sue for malpractice and her catastrophic grief.

“How would one calculate a sum to replace the dead person?” she wrote. “Would some jury decide on, say, \$100,000 for his hands, \$50,000 for his beard and his thick, dark eyebrows, \$75,000 for his hazel eyes?”

The case was settled for an undisclosed amount.

Ms. Gilbert was the author of eight books of poetry; her most recent, “Judgment Day,” was published in 2018. “Aftermath” (2011), her penultimate book of poetry, is largely a collection about grief and loss — her partner after Mr. Gilbert, the mathematician David Gale, [died in 2008](#) — leavened with a clutch of sardonic verses addressing her decaying older self, including “Tooth Implant Sonnet.”

“Sandra brought poetry to our collaboration,” Ms. Gubar said. “She never pontificated, either as a critic or a poet or a teacher or a feminist. It was just not in her nature. Instead, she would draw upon lyricism and a visceral response to literature to articulate the fears and hopes of her generation.”