

BRIGHTLIGHTS

[Annette Federico]

The *Madwoman* and the F-word

BY JAMIE MARSH

Few of English professor Annette Federico's students call themselves feminists. "Today's undergrads don't like to be labeled," she explains. Their hesitancy to embrace the title isn't disheartening, even for this noted feminist author whose most recent work is a collection of critical essays, *Gilbert and Gubar's the Madwoman in the Attic After Thirty Years*. Just take away the "F-word," she says, and students' enthusiasm for "feminist" notions is still palpable in classroom discussion — even when the ideas are veiled within 120,000-word Victorian novels.

Keep in mind, it wasn't so long ago that such discussions weren't facilitated in English classes. As recently as 1991, when Federico left a tenure-track job at a college in New Jersey to join the JMU faculty, the English curriculum was still fairly traditional. "The department's focus was very canonical, and the canon in most U.S. English departments before the 1970s and '80s was Anglo-American and male," she says, "but this was 1991!"

Academically, Federico wasn't exposed to women's studies or female professors, but she was "distantly in tune with the 'women's movement.'" In 1979 a groundbreaking work of literary criticism was published: Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. The authors re-examined British literature in search of a female tradition, developing a theory known as the "anxiety of authorship." Federico explains that, "because of the way women were socialized, to even dare to pick up a pen and declare you have a story to tell or a poem to create was in itself a frightening, unfeminine, 'monstrous' act." The book's first sentence was a summarizing shocker: "Is the pen a metaphorical penis?"

Federico was "floored," when she picked up the book in 1983 as a master's degree student. She bought her own copy and wrapped it in press-sensitive plastic. That copy is still in her home library, along with the second edition published in 2000, and now her own influential 2009 reappraisal. "I suppose *Madwoman* and other works of feminist lit crit from the early '80s reached me because these books insisted that reading and studying literature is not an arcane pur-



"When students put down their text-messaging devices and re-learn the pleasure of focused reading, the experience is very satisfying," says Roop Distinguished Professor in English Studies Annette Federico, who published a book of essays looking back 30 years on *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

suit, but something that connects meaningfully with people's lives," she says.

The canon has since been bulldozed. English departments have established courses not only on women's literature but on a multiplicity of literatures and viewpoints from the Middle East, Africa, and the Caribbean, and about African-American, Asian-American, gay and lesbian writers. Modern young women have a less threatened view of male domination than their mothers may have had, and considerable academic advantages. That's why it was so important in 1991 when Federico joined JMU's fledging Women's Studies committee, when the English department did not have any courses on women's literature. Though hired to teach 19th-century British lit, Federico says she "loved the opportunity" to expand her teaching repertoire. A trio of professors drew up a set of courses on women's fiction, poetry, drama, and on feminist theory, and got them into the

catalog. Today, the department has faculty with expertise in these fields. "Students get that the intersection of gender and sexuality, cultural and political power and language is a site of tremendous importance, whether you call yourself a feminist, a post-feminist, nothing, or something else," Federico says.

JMU students are still learning those lessons from the *Madwoman* book. Federico assigned parts of the 719-page tome during a seminar on the Bronte sisters in fall 2007. The course was in conjunction with theater professor Roger Hall's stage production of *Jane Eyre*. Though the play's script was written in 1998, it was obviously a reading of the novel through *Madwoman's* groundbreaking analysis, Federico realized. The feminist critique had been simply absorbed into the new dramatic interpretation. She re-read those chapters and found it "bold and full of insights" even for the generation she calls "third-wavers." "The Brontes can inspire a fan following, but we took our fandom into intellectual depth and heights, and became good readers and critics," she recalls. "I thought it might be an interesting

subject for a collection of essays."

Federico sent out calls for papers for the collection. Exactly 30 years after the original publication, Federico and scholars from across the country reflected on how *Madwoman* influences teaching, women in academia, and feminist activism. In the book's acknowledgements, she credits "the students in that class, who convinced me that the long chapters I assigned from *The Madwoman in the Attic* are still both controversial and intoxicating."

Victorian-era women authors certainly didn't use the "feminist" word, nor could they have imagined the current opportunities for women. JMU students can minor in women's studies, take classes on gender and psychology, U.S. women's history, body studies, women and race, women and war, and on and on. "They don't have to fight for these courses," Federico says. "They're now respected fields of intellectual inquiry. Maybe if they had to fight for them, they'd be less afraid of being labeled feminist." ■