



Women's Literary Creativity and the Female Body

EDITED BY DIANE LONG HOEVELER
AND DONNA DECKER SCHUSTER



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Diane Long Hoeveler and Donna Decker Schuster

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INTRODUCTION: WOMEN, CREATIVITY, AND THE FEMALE BODY

*Diane Long Hoeveler and
Donna Decker Schuster*

Women. Body. Psyche. Creativity. These are large categories of meaning and even more amorphous terms to explore in a volume of essays written by diverse hands. This collection, however, attempts to place in convergence a few central questions: How has woman's experience of her body shaped her creativity? How do women exist in cultural contexts and, more importantly, how do they respond to cultural traditions that impose their conventions and contexts on women's identities? Does the experience of being a woman, or more specifically of giving birth, alter the creative process for women? How and in what ways are women's bodies conduits for ideological messages? How do women's literary works respond to the variety of different ideologies imposed upon them? How are the literary genres they use shaped by their responses to their cultural positions? Large questions, perhaps ultimately unanswerable, but these are the topics around which this volume revolves in its explorations of British, American, Spanish, and Canadian women artists as well as through the various genres in which they have written. The past twenty years has brought an explosion of cultural criticism and yet, explorations of women's writings across cultures are rare, only recently becoming a topic of critical inquiry. It is as if we are just beginning to understand the ways in which gender and creativity are performances imbued with their own cultural discourses. Moreover, literary and critical examinations of nationalism focus almost exclusively on the texts of men. As categories, "culture" and "nation" are extremely slippery; they carry within themselves both the hope of unity as well as the oppression of roles based on location, race, and gender. Our central questions for this collection, then, are, How do these external forces shape the creativity of women? How do creative women respond to these forces? What are the locations of women's creativity?

Creativity is a mystery. What exactly is it and why have human beings evolved in such a way that they can create abstract representations of their lived internal realities? Why are some people capable of creating art, literature, music, or dance, while other people are not only incapable, but even lack the capacity to appreciate such creations? Is creativity—along with its manifestation in language—the quality that separates human beings from all other forms of life and, if so, what does this mean? Is the human brain hardwired to create, or does a particular gene enhance one's ability to create? Is creativity the product of nature or nurture? Or is creativity ultimately a spiritual gift, a talent, a blessing that needs to be encouraged and supported in every human life? These are just some of the questions that have puzzled the numerous critics and theorists who have attempted to grapple with the issue of creativity over more than two millennia.

It is interesting to note that Terry Eagleton has claimed that whereas the Irish are not oppressed as Irish, women are oppressed as women (29). In the case of Ireland, the land itself provides geographical advantages for its colonial oppressor. In the case of women, cultural and national conventions marginalize them as a result of their bodily differences. In fact, Eagleton believes that women writers should not “[circumvent] the abstract universal equalizations of exchange value” within nationalism, but rather they enter into the “alienated logic” of nationalism “in order to turn it against itself” in order to break free of oppressive conventions that inhibit creativity (30–31). Creative women, then, have a unique relationship to their cultural contexts, as well as to the literary genre to which they respond. This volume is an exploration of how women artists respond to their cultural and national contexts when they engage their creativity: how they enter from the margins and create from their marginalized contexts. And although this collection offers no definitive answer, the volume does attempt to engage one aspect of this amorphous and mysterious topic: What does it mean for women to create within particular literary and cultural contexts? How is the female body written on textuality? In short, how is the female body analogous to the geographical space of land? How have women inhabited their bodies as people have lived in nation-states?

Traditionally, women's creativity has been bracketed by their reproductive bodies. That is, historically women have found (or been forced to find) their creative outlet by bearing and raising their children. Maternity has been valued as the highest form of creativity available for women (read: the valorization of the Virgin Mary with the infant Jesus in her arms). Such an icon has been literally

worshipped in Western civilization, while Japanese, Chinese, African, and Indian societies have fostered very much the same sort of iconography of and attitudes toward the mother-woman. The historical record makes it clear that there has been a persistent focus on the female body in all attempts to understand women as creative, which has led the female to be seen as the subject of creative efforts by men, rather than the agent of creativity herself. In fact, women's bodies, as Jane Garrity argues, valued for their ability to perpetuate the British race and as the central representation of British racial stability, were the primary symbols of nationalism and culture (1). Garrity's study is not only recent, but it is one of only a few studies that position women's creativity as a response to the nationalist codes that are inextricable from gender. The woman's body itself acts as a synecdoche for the nation and national identity. This volume proposes a similar objective: to examine the ways in which cultural and national conventions, which are inextricable from gender, shape and become the location for women artists to respond to and become agents of their own subjectivity. Breaking free of objectification and becoming a subject in one's own right has taken more years than many of us want to contemplate. It has been the exceptional woman—creative, supported, and driven—who has succeeded in creating art works that have endured and entered the canon. Thus, in terms of the body, creativity, and culture, as Eagleton suggests, this volume interrogates how women have entered into the alienated logic of their cultures and nations and used their creativity to turn that logic on itself.

I. THE FEMALE BODY/VOICE

It is because the female body has for so long been identified as an erotic object, canonized in the nudes of high art and the sex symbols of popular culture, that efforts to locate and describe alternative images became a paramount goal of the feminist movement and [therefore] of the culture at large.

(Goldstein, vii–viii)

It is necessary to begin by tracing the complex intersections between masculinist ideologies and the female body, sometimes neatly theorized as “the male gaze,” or the notion that women in Western discourse systems can only be commodified, objectified, and positioned as objects of consumption for the aggressive masculine economy of capitalism. One of the ways that feminist critics have reacted to this theory is to posit the notion of gender as a “performance,” and to

trace how the performance of the “I,” as Judith Butler says, becomes a central focus for women’s creativity as these performances respond to male ideological constructions of the “female.” In her study *Feminist Perspectives on the Body*, Barbara Brook admits that the question of language and accessibility, especially as it relates to the questions of women and the body, and in our case women and creativity, is “always confronted with the inaccuracy and inadequacy of the terms already available: there may be no ‘clear’ and ‘transparent’ (commonsense) way of writing/talking through these thoughts.” However, it is also important to ensure that those theories and the new terms in which they develop themselves do not remain in isolation as an exclusive and hierarchical “body of knowledge” constituting what Meaghan Morris has called (speaking of the “idol-worship” of a whole stable of mainly French, mainly male, theorists) “a peculiar ‘doxa’ that constitutes a very single-minded, ponderous and phallogocentric conversation” (Brook, x; her emphasis). Thus, our theoretical boundaries in *Women’s Literary Creativity and the Female Body* reflect explorations of women’s creativity and the body as the location for inscribed culture. We discuss the ways in which women write from rhetorical locations on the margins of culture as sites of their creativity as they are bounced out of public discourse and convention by the patriarchal values imposed upon them. This difficult task is made more complex by the variety of feminism(s) used to examine the question of women and creativity. If we claim essentialist foundations, then surely our collection would be participating in an outdated and outmoded theoretical quest. Nevertheless, a study based on theories of feminism and the question of women and creativity, as more recent theorists such as Judith Butler, Vicki Kirby, Barbara Brook, and Jane Gallop suggest, must acknowledge its essentialist goal of examining the transformation of the lives of women—where they find their creativities, where they perform these acts, and the rhetorical qualities of these sites of performance and execution, as it were.

Recently, Rose Weitz has traced the history of attitudes toward women’s bodies in conjunction with their social and political status. In America, there was a counterreaction to the women’s movement, an influx of women workers during the Industrial Revolution, and growing numbers of women seeking education. Because of these factors, “new ‘scientific’ ideas with older definitions of women’s bodies as ill or fragile [began to suggest] that white middle-class women were unable to sustain the responsibilities of political power or the burdens of education or employment” (Weitz, 5–6). In England, much the same situation developed, this time buttressed by “Darwin’s theories

[which] meshed well with Victorian ideas about middle-class white women's sexuality, which depicted women as the objects of male desire, emphasized romance, downplayed female sexual desire, and reinforced a sexual double standard" (Weitz, 6).

Our collection deals with many American and British women artists, often middle or upper middle class, and educated, who reacted to the social, political, and cultural constructions of the female text. Weitz's history of perspectives is particularly useful for understanding the cultural and social shifts to which women artists were responding. Weitz claims that "with women's increasing entry into education and employment, ideas about the physical and emotional frailty of women—with their strong echoes of both Christian and Aristotelian disdain for women and their bodies—were adopted by nineteenth-century doctors as justifications for keeping women uneducated and unemployed" (6). Weitz cites a 1984 study done on women's health during the nineteenth century by Vera Bullough and Martha Voght in which they discuss physicians who in 1905 claimed that "hard [academic] study killed sexual desire in women, took away their beauty, and brought on hysteria, neurasthenia [a mental disorder], dyspepsia," and a variety of other disorders (Bullough and Voght in Weitz, 6). Moreover, Bullough and Voght write that the president of the Oregon State Medical Society, F. W. Van Dyke, argued that educated women "could not bear children with ease because study arrested the development of the pelvis at the same time it increased the size of the child's brain, and therefore its head. The result was extensive suffering in childbirth by educated women" (Weitz, 6). These social theories about educated and middle-class women defined by the medical profession bear more than a passing resemblance to the women artists discussed in this volume.

When we move from the historical situation of the female body in the nineteenth century to the twentieth, one would think that we would see a positive or liberatory evolution of attitudes, but such is not the case. Vicki Kirby's contemporary reading of poststructural and postmodern theorists asks, "How is it that the cultural context that surrounds a body can also come to inhabit it?" (4). Kirby explores the ways in which the poststructural and postmodern debate surrounding the sign and essentialism in feminist studies manifests itself in the female body and its corporeality: the "separation of nature from culture is rendered palpable in the actual object"; in other words, there can be no world outside of the text, or object—"pure representation can't have a body" (5). This representative bodilessness is a problem for feminism(s) because the word and idea of feminism itself assumes

an essentialism about what is female or what is not female. However, Kirby's study proves extremely valuable because in an analogous manner this collection also attempts to derive its cultural context from these feminist sites of exploration, which are the contextualized locations for debate—rhetorical sites, if you will. It is also in the location of the rhetorical site where we examine the forces of female creativity produced by a variety of creative women, never separating them from culture, margin, or mainstream. As Kirby notes, the “challenge is to realize the ways in which we are inextricably immersed within the strange weave of essentialism's identity, and to acknowledge that this bind is one that is not merely prohibitive, but also enabling” (72).

Instead of dismissing the body, we suggest, like Kirby, that often women's creativity comes from the culture as it is inscribed on the body. Kirby states, “What we take to be anatomy is just another moment in culture's refiguring of itself. In other words, anatomy is an illusion of sorts, albeit a very powerful one, and one that [Jane] Gallop imbues with a certain political efficacy” (Kirby, 75–76). Kirby's analysis of Jonathan Culler's theory of agency provides an apt transition from rhetorical theory to the cultural implications of female agency on creative production. Kirby explains how Culler reads Ferdinand Saussure in this matter by suggesting that the individual who emerges from a larger system as a “speaking subject articulates individuality” (Kirby, 39). This “actualization of identity” then “becomes the embodiment of concrete universality”—agency within culture. More telling is the conclusion that helps us situate *Women's Literary Creativity* as part of the complex web of female agency within culture and its inscriptions on their creativity. Kirby writes, “To insist that the individual has no creative influence over language is just as erroneous as its opposite assertion, namely, that the individual is the originary site that explains its metamorphosis” (39). That is to say, as a part of culture, nationalism provides an abstract system within which cultural ideology operates and out of which female agency emerges, even if from its margins. Fortunately, or unfortunately, this returns our volume and its rhetorical location to the issue of essentialism. What we discover and explore in this volume is also Kirby's conclusion, that female agency and women's creative explorations of identity lie in the play within “the very identity of essentialism—the immutability of its location and its separation from anti-essentialism” (Kirby, 40). *Women's Literary Creativity*, then, offers examinations of the way women created within and without this essential idea of feminism(s).

Other recent theorists have also addressed some of these same issues, notably Jeffrey Cohen and Gail Weiss, who offer two important

metaphors for our collection by following the leads of Gloria Anzaldúa and Hans-Georg Gadamer, although they do so from the perspective of the body as the site of exploration. They claim that Anzaldúa sees the body as a “space la frontera/the borderlands, a ‘place of contradictions,’” which mirrors our complex view of essentialism, while Gadamer offers a process of viewing the body’s borders as a “fusion of horizons” (Cohen and Weiss, 2). In both cases, this fusion, “wherein past and present comprise an ongoing dialect, ensuring that neither the past nor the present can be viewed as fixed” situates *Women’s Literary Creativity* in a fluid “borderland” (Cohen and Weiss, 2). This volume offers literary boundaries of exploration: the *canon* of American poetry, the *literary genre as rhetorical site*, and female *roles* of agency dependent upon the body from the Medusa to the Mother. Our collection is, then, in step with what Susan Bordo has called second-generation feminism, reflecting a postmodern sensibility that rejects “the ‘totalizing’ rhetoric that confidently speaks of female gender as a universal category (when gender is defined as the social organization of sexual difference)” (qtd. in Goldstein, viii).

II. CREATIVITY

When the social position of all human beings was believed to be set by natural law or was considered God-given, biology was irrelevant and women and men of different classes all had their assigned places. When scientists began to question the divine basis of social order and replaced faith with empirical knowledge, what they saw was that women were very different from men in that they had wombs and menstruated. Such anatomical differences destined them for an entirely different social life from men. In actuality, the basic bodily material is the same for females and males, and except for procreative hormones and organs, female and male human beings have similar bodies.

(Lorber, 12)

Before examining the individual cases of female creativity in this volume, it is necessary to sketch an overview of the some of dominant approaches to how creativity has been understood in Western culture and how creativity intersects with cultural and nationalist ideologies as they relate to women. Plato believed that inspiration and “divine madness” were the roots of creativity, while Aristotle thought that creativity could be attained if one mastered the forms—the rules, so to speak—of an artistic product. Nietzsche synthesized these two different approaches by calling the first one “Dionysian” and the second

“Apollonian,” and claimed that the creative process actually requires both types of inspiration:

The Dionysian trance involves a destruction of boundaries between self and others and a loss of the self in the world, the loss of everyday rules and order, and primitive states of rapture and transport. Its analogue is intoxication and its guiding principle is unity as opposed to Apollonian separation and analysis. The Apollonian phase of creation is seen as involving individuation: a tendency to order and understand, to give form and structure.

(Martindale, 15).

The Apollonian/Dionysian approach to creativity—representing its power in the forms of two male gods—has been a particularly potent way of gendering creativity as male and excluding women by their very bodily reality. But this essentialist, gendered approach to the subject was challenged and perhaps partially displaced by the advent of psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud made several attempts to explain creativity as a psychological process, most notably in his essay “The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming” (1908). Here Freud notes that the literary artist “does the same as the child at play; he [*sic*] creates a world of phantasy which he [*sic*] takes very seriously; that is, he [*sic*] invests it with a great deal of affect, while separating it sharply from reality” (45). All of these “phantasies” concern “His Majesty the Ego, the hero of all daydreams and all novels” (51). Literature, for Freud, consists in recording fantasies of self-aggrandizement, with the creation of the male epic hero compensating for the frustrations of life through the creation of fantasies or fictions. When there are many characters with one omniscient narrator, Freud claims that the minor characters are split-off aspects of the dominant ego of the narrator (read: author). Further, he notes that the author “bribes” his reader with devices that produce aesthetic pleasure so that the reader will participate in the author’s fantasy without recognizing it as such (54). The three modes of fantasy that Freud discusses and the means by which an author compensates for the traumas they conceal will be discussed at length in Chapter 3.

Another psychological approach was proposed by Ernst Kris, who defined creativity as “regression in the service of the ego.” For Kris, this regression is similar to the type of thought found in dreaming or in psychosis. After immersion in this initial stage, the creator uses logical or learned types of thought in order to complete the artistic product, thereby employing both the Dionysian and Apollonian modes outlined so many centuries earlier by Plato and Aristotle (Halliwell, 79). Notice that in this approach creativity becomes linked to either the

unconscious mind or psychosis (madness). It is as if this internalized feature is regulated, for women, by the nationalist paradigm. The divinely possessed genius has always been sacred territory for the male; one searches the historical record in vain to locate an actual female divinely inspired creative genius. The most famous example of an imaginary female genius, of course, was Germaine de Stael's *Corinne*, heroine of the eponymous novel. But as all of her readers know, *Corinne* was punished for her genius, and her last act of creation was to make a performance piece of her own death, which highlights the centrality of the elegiac to women's literary creativity.

Even when one considers the genre of elegy, we are confronted with the fact that elegies as well as the term "melancholy" have both been read as the province of the male genius, inspired by nationalist and cultural ideals. In fact, Juliana Schiersari claims that death and melancholy have had a gendered reception (17). Whereas the male genius is inspired by melancholy, such as in Shelley's *Adonais* or Milton's *Lycidas*, women's melancholy is often read as melodramatic and sentimental. Male critics and artists often reject women's creativity on the same grounds that can valorize male genius. This volume asks, What happens when women writers rebel and refuse, adapt, experiment with, and contemplate these literary inequities in their art?

Yet another psychological approach to creativity can be found in *Art and the Artist* by Otto Rank. This work explored the psychological sources of creativity, which Rank claimed could be found in the productive use of childhood fears: "If 'play' is a mechanism which enables the child to cope with fear and ward off 'unpleasure,' then 'normal adults' can be seen to indulge in the same kind of play in 'day-dreaming' or 'phantasizing'" (49). If Freud stressed the fantasy component of the creative act, Rank emphasized the traumatic aspects of compensation instead. For Rank, artists reshape myths and legends in order to rid themselves of their own masochistic or sadistic feelings toward their parents, as well as others. There is no doubt that Rank was primarily writing about male artists, and there is no doubt that the highest form of art for Rank was the creation of dramas. The artist had the capacity to transform "infantile play" into "theatre play" or "egocentric day-dream into thrilling novel." But Rank most valued the theater for being "the most direct kind of presentation (in which there is no mediating narrator) because it comes nearest the dream form and even borders closely on the action of the hysterical attack" (49–55). Artistic creativity was particularly valued by Rank because it allowed the dramatic staging of unresolved conflict in artists, so that they could "steer a course between internal pressures (the release of psychic energy) and external

social and cultural forces which impinge upon his or her world” (Martindale, 80). These forces, cultural and social, are always already in play with creative production. Only recently have women’s studies begun to explore them as such.

When we finally hear a woman talk about creativity we hear a somewhat different story. Our collection attempts to provide essays that reveal the inner creativity of women as responses to these external contexts. In her book *On Not Being Able to Paint*, Joanna Field (a.k.a. Marion Milner) says of the creative process: “It is surely through the arts that we deliberately restore the split and bring subject and object together into a particular kind of new unity” (13). “[T]he experience of the inner and the outer coinciding . . . is consciously brought about in the arts, through the conscious acceptance of the as-if-ness of the experience and the conscious manipulation of a malleable material” (13). Field’s language smacks of Jungian categories as she stresses the need to bring together in balance what Jung refers to as the anima and animus. Field, like Jung before her, considers creativity to be both a temporarily transcendental process and a more enduringly therapeutic, personality-transforming activity. That is, creativity is an act of reparation, not a working out of fantasy or trauma, not a scream of pain or a shout of anger. It is a route *through*, as Eagleton claims, the external forces that thwart the agency of women.

Object-relations psychoanalysts like D. W. Winnicott, Melanie Klein, and Heinz Kohut agree and see creativity as a basic developmental end. By “creativity” they mean not only artistic creation, but also a wide range of experiences and activities (Kirschner, 189). Winnicott has stated that “either individuals live creatively and feel that life is worth living or else they cannot live creatively and are doubtful about the value of living” (83). Creativity for him is a necessary manifestation of being alive, but he also notes that one cannot create unless one’s sense of self (what Freud labels the ego) is strong enough to allow such activity. One gains such strength only through the mother’s nurturance and care:

This variable in human beings [creativity] is directly related to the quantity and quality of environmental provision at the beginning or in the early phases of each baby’s living experience. Here at this point where creativity either comes into being or does not come into being (or alternatively is lost) the theoretician must take the environment into account, and no statement that concerns the individual as an isolate can touch this central problem of the source of creativity.

(83–84)

And so we are back again to the central fixation: the mother, the “good-enough” mother or the part-object mother, the breast, the woman as consoler, redeemer, subservient to and symbol of the pursuit of national unity. Suffice it to say that male artists have been privileged in a society that positions women as caretakers for masculine fantasies.

More recently, a critic like Camille Paglia has (notoriously) claimed that creativity is intrinsically male: “Man, the sexual conceptualizer and projector, has ruled art because art is his Apollonian response towards and away from woman.” For her, women only create when their masculine side dominates (31). The female poets Paglia discusses—Emily Bronte and Emily Dickinson—are in her opinion psychically androgynous, in fact, much more masculine in their psyches than feminine. What is important in many of these theories of creativity is their very clear endorsement of the living conditions that either crush or enhance the development of human creativity. And for theorists like Paglia, these conditions are the same for men and women. But it hardly bears noting that if no access to education or training or practice is provided, a person’s innate talents will necessarily wither.

III. WRITING ACROSS CULTURES

Male taunts are attempts to undermine women’s political competence by tying it to artistic success.

(Cucullu, 158)

In addition to the variety of theories about the female body/voice and women’s creativity that this volume attempts to engage, national identity and culture have to be foregrounded as explanatory categories. If women have been constructed by discourses that privilege their bodies, their essentialized “nature(s)” as nurturers and muses for men, then what influence does culture have on their writings? Garrity has recently observed that ideas of nation and empire have always been intertwined through “tropes of the female reproductive body” (1). Women have often been depicted in political propaganda worldwide as earning their citizen status by producing the next generation of soldiers, and so mourning and melancholia are implicit in women’s roles as citizens of nation-states. But if women have lacked political agency in their own rights, they have sought compensation in literary works. Virginia Woolf, for example, writes of the need to create “psychological geography” that women writers would explore: “Could [you] not sometimes turn around and, shading [your] eyes

in the manner of Robinson Crusoe on the desert island, look into the future and trace on its mist the faint lines of the land which some day perhaps we may reach?" (qtd. in Garrity, 2–3). The female body that emerges in much of the women writers we examine in this volume is often permeable and unstable as it responds to male frameworks for creativity. It is also, however, frequently associated with the civilizing process that nations undergo as they move toward secularization and modernism. Garrity cites Woolf in this regard as saying that in 1938 women were still "not full 'daughter[s] of England' because their civil and social rights [were] so curtailed in comparison to those of men" (qtd. in Garrity, 1).

Women's Literary Creativity seeks to address how women's creativity often derives from the margins of culture, revisioned as a reflection of the body under hegemonic rule, subject to culture and male theories about women's "nature." Like other collections, specifically *Rhetorical Women*, the chapters in this volume "consider gender in relation to other axes of difference, such as race . . . seeking connections between present-day practices and their historical precedents" in order to show "how masculinist values" (Miller and Bridwell-Bowles, 5) may have obfuscated, infiltrated, and otherwise influenced our readings of women and creativity. This volume attempts not to codify a "women's tradition" of creativity, but instead to locate acts of creativity at the margins of what we see as mainstream culture and nation-states. As such we have attempted to situate the theoretical foundation of our collection not just through mainstream culture, but through rhetorical theories and postmodern studies that expand the notion of female agency. Obviously, this volume cannot address all of the large issues in regard to women as writers in all nations, but it does attempt an overview by including works by women imbued with the national traditions of Britain, America, Canada, and Spain.

IV. THE CHAPTERS IN THIS COLLECTION

Our attitudes toward the female body are likely to change in keeping with the artists' own self-conscious awareness of their hands-on status as makers. Contemporary artists are likely to use humor or anger to signify resistance to voyeurism, turning the erotic into a challenging joke.

(Goldstein, x)

In assembling the chapters in this volume we have drawn on a variety of disciplines, although our focus is primarily on women as creators

of literary texts within three primary nationalistic traditions. As such, our volume differs from *Women, Creativity, and the Arts: Critical and Autobiographical Perspectives*, edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona and Lucinda Ebersole. Their collection provides the theoretical source materials—historical, cultural, social, and psychological—for many of the more specialized case studies of creativity in this book. In addition, their work gives a good deal of attention to women as visual artists, a different focus from the one this work pursues.

The first section of this volume, “Revisiting/Revising Genre and Gender,” contains five chapters that move from Bradstreet’s colonial America to the Spanish coastal narratives written by women in the 1920s. In addition, other chapters address the intersection of genre and gender by focusing on the gothic as a female trauma narrative and the elegy as a specifically female literary form. The first chapter in this section, Katarzyna Malecka’s “Anne Bradstreet’s Application of Modern Feminist Theory,” examines the poetry of Anne Bradstreet through the lenses of Lacanian and Kristevan theories of language. Contrasting Bradstreet’s poetry to the Puritan ethos in which she lived and wrote, Malecka highlights the rhetorical devices and strategies that Bradstreet used in order to emphasize the world of the senses over the spiritual in her works.

The second chapter in this section, Beth Jensen’s “Creative Tension: The Symbolic and Semiotic in Emily Dickinson’s ‘I heard a Fly buzz—when I died,’” also explores Kristeva’s and Lacan’s theories of the Symbolic and Semiotic and their role in the creative process. Jensen uses the revolutionary elements in Dickinson’s poetry as a springboard to explore the creative tension within Dickinson’s work as the poet both undermines traditional poetic form and underscores notions of identity. Recalling Judith Butler’s theory of the performative, this chapter evaluates Dickinson’s speaker as an identity subject to the male gaze, grappling with the I/eye sense of self. The creative tension is, for Dickinson, the ultimate tension between life and death.

As mentioned above, a variety of genres are interrogated in this section as examples of literary forms that both foster and constrict women’s literary creativity and productivity. The chapters in this section examine the ways in which women’s contributions to genre are gendered and what canonical readings of these genres and works may have contributed, missed, or misinterpreted. Historical interpretations of literary genres, symbols, and movements have not been exempt from the external forces of culture and the nation, thus, this section attempts to answer the question, How have women’s

responses to culture and the nation fostered or shaped their creativity? How have these texts as responses to cultural and nationalist issues, in turn, shaped the genres in which they write?

The source of resistance to these codes is often the impetus for creativity, as can be seen in Diane Long Hoeveler's chapter, "Father Don't You See That I Am Dreaming?: The Female Gothic and the Creative Process." Here, Hoeveler reads two of the most famous examples of what many have claimed is the quintessential female genre, the female gothic. Hoeveler examines both Ann Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest* and Mary Shelley's *Matilda* as novels in which dreams are foregrounded as the means of access to the unconscious mind, paradoxically the source of both trauma and creativity. In addition, both novels represent a daughter caught in the conflict of resolving the demands of the personal and the familial in order to forge her own identity. Women, Hoeveler suggests, access melancholy and dreams as sources of creativity; they work out individual conflicts, and forge textual representations through their suffering. And suffering is inflicted upon the individual from external forces that then become internal trauma and the stuff of fantasies that are transfigured into fictions.

Donna Schuster's chapter, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Rhetorical Location: Modern Rhetors Transgressing Culture and Transforming Genre," examines the "rhetorical locations" of three women speakers from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poems. Schuster argues that these rhetors speak from rhetorical locations that engage the cultural, gender, and physical locations of their oppression. From the margins and from the center, these women speakers self-consciously examine their own creativity and mourning. As they do so, they examine the cultural conventions imposed upon their bodies. Through these literary acts, Barrett Browning, the woman poet, subverts the mostly male form of elegy, developing a modernist elegiac aesthetic—transforming genre through an exploration of gender.

The final chapter in this section is "Elegance and Make-Up: Nature, Modernity, and the Female Body in Spanish Beach Narratives of the 1920s: Wenceslao Fernández Flórez and Carmen de Burgos." Here, Eugenia Afinoguénova examines the Spanish beach narratives written during the 1920s as works that position women writers as voices of modernization for their society. Reflecting the growing commodification of the female body, as well as the invention of "leisure" for the burgeoning middle class, beach narratives both reify women as objects of the male gaze at the same time that they position women as active agents of their own engagement with the natural and increasingly secular world.

The second section in this volume, “From the Medusa to the Mother,” also spans several genres, from films and short stories, to novels. Jane Dowson, the author of *Women, Modernism, and British Poetry*, posits that for women poets writing in a nationalist tradition, “their writing often registers an official public discourse in conflict with an unarticulated . . . resistance to the literary and social formations of the feminine, particularly with reference to the idealized maternal function” (vii). Thus, the question that situates the second half of our volume’s final theoretical exploration of women’s creativity is: Is creativity the product of internal conflict or is it the imagination’s method of dealing with external forces imposed upon the individual? This central question focuses the chapters that privilege the Medusa figure and Hélène Cixous’s seminal essay “The Laugh of the Medusa.” These chapters employ a number of different theories of women’s creativity, including formal literary concerns, nationalistic dynamics, and psychoanalysis as ways of examining unarticulated resistance to the imposed conventions of the female experience, symbols of the female experience, and the maternal.

Again employing Cixous’s Medusa, Linda M. Lewis explores “Mary Augusta Ward’s Literary Portraits of the Artist as Medusa.” She explores Ward’s depiction of women artists in her novels as well as the way the works of the Brontës influenced, reflected, and shaped literary and artistic critical feminist positions in the late nineteenth century. Lewis grapples with the use of a myth that portrays women artists as dangerous, castrating threats capable of turning male admirers to stone. Focusing on the male gaze, her chapter explores just some of the ways that power shifts in genre and gender.

We move then to the contemporary film *Mrs. Doubtfire*, which Karen M. Odden reads as a “retelling” of Victorian social codes about women and work. Odden compares the Victorian novel *East Lynne* to the film as a “retelling” that gives voice to characters left out or absent during some part of a narrative. These elisions reveal class, gender, or race biases within the original work. In depicting the different and similar ways that Miranda from the film and Isabel from the novel gain agency and fulfill their creative desires through work, Odden concludes that it is only by failing in the maternal role that these women gain creative agency. The construction of female agency, then, is represented with an inherent, internal conflict between the mother and economic creative success, returning us to one of the major themes in this volume.

Marguerite Helmers also examines how ideologies function as boundaries to which women’s bodies are subject. Helmers’s specific

aim is to examine A. S. Byatt's novel *Possession* through the theorists Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. Like Linda Lewis's chapter, Helmers traces the Medusa figure from the Romantic period to Byatt's novel, drawing on the construct of the fairy Melusina, the fictional poem written by the character Christabel LaMotte. This variation on the mythical character, Helmer claims, represents a dominant fear of women's creativity as a potential power for destruction and disruption of the "social order." Helmers reasons that Byatt presents a poststructuralist view of women; that is, the novel's structure, its narrative, and its characters resist a central, unifying meaning or identity. Instead, meaning and significance are to be found on the margins of the text—the only appropriate place in the context of the unifying codes of nationalism.

The next chapter in the collection, Pascale Sardin's "Creation and Procreation in Margaret Atwood's 'Giving Birth': A Narrative of Doubles," straddles the French-Canadian relationship by applying a variety of French psychoanalytical paradigms to a reading of Atwood's story, a narrative that employs a doubled woman experiencing, or maybe reexperiencing, childbirth. As a meditation on the creative process, Atwood's story sums up a number of the dominant concerns and tropes that have been explored throughout the volume. The mother/daughter dyad, the self-reflexive stance toward textuality and sexuality, the doubling of self and other, all of these issues are played out in Atwood's postmodern tale, a meditation on what it means to be a woman as well as an artist.

The final chapter in the volume, Ian Williams's "Female Voices, Male Listeners: Identifying Gender in the Poetry of Anne Sexton and Wanda Coleman," also focuses on the performative by interrogating the American poetic voice through an exploration of gender and identity. Williams acknowledges that gender is performative, and therefore he examines the female poetic voice in relation to the male critic and reader. Williams reveals that the female voice is aligned with revolt, what Williams characterizes as a "breach of poetic decorum." Participating in this performative poetic, traditional male critics of Sexton and Coleman participate in this gendered textuality by revealing an ideological clash between female voice and male reader. The responses of male critics evince the traditional masculine double bind—thus features of "women's" poetry are condemned as they are seen as participating in male poetic traditions. Williams's discussion of the East-Coast Sexton and the West-Coast Coleman provides a valuable examination of the formal and geographically based properties of poetry while also playing into American notions of cultural

boundaries. Gender is also examined as it conflicts with and adheres to the cultural constructions and social factors that are imposed upon and shape female voices.

The chapters in this volume, then, consistently position women as creative agents, not subjects. Further, they present women writers as deeply immersed in the national, cultural traditions of their own countries and, as such, as artists with political, social, and economic agendas. These writers foreground the psychological and internal processes of identity formation, as all of the artists are clearly invested in making real the internal dynamics of their lives. The only way that any of us can understand the thoughts and feelings of other human beings is through the expression, re-creation, and re-imagining of their ideas and emotions. The creative process is mysterious, as is the process by which a woman writer negotiates her national identity and her cultural heritage. This volume examines how the creative process intersects with the pragmatic, geographical, and metaphysical boundaries of cultural and national traditions. The cultural and nationalist traditions explored here reveal the ways in which culture and nation are inscribed in identity and within gender. But by studying the products of creativity, we glimpse yet another mind in the process of creating its own—and its culture's—realities.

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SECTION I



REVISITING/REVISING GENRE
AND GENDER

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CHAPTER 1



ANNE BRADSTREET'S APPLICATION OF MODERN FEMINIST THEORY

Katarzyna Malecka

I

In *The Continuity of American Poetry*, Roy Harvey Pearce reminds us that Puritan verse presents “little or no problem of a specifically artistic purpose” and that “the doctrine, the event, the occasion guarantee purpose, so that the poet becomes merely a reporter, such eloquence as he can command being put to a higher than poetic use” (22). Developing his argument, Pearce states that Anne Bradstreet “is like her [Puritan] fellows in being essentially the poet of the event, and a not very imaginative one at that,” that she is “worth reading principally in poems like [“Contemplations”] and in those ‘personal’ poems published after her death” (23). Like many critics before and after him, Pearce seems to adhere to Adrienne Rich’s 1967 famous “Foreword” to *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, which drew an unjust dividing line between Bradstreet’s early public poems and the more personal, posthumously published works. However, Pearce appears also more cautious in his judgment of Bradstreet than some of the early feminist critics were, he does not fail to include a propitiatory statement that Anne Bradstreet, while being “the poet of the event,” is primarily

The only poet of this order whom we have good cause to remember for what she did, not what she meant to do . . . Perhaps we remember her

too well, because the publication of her poetry in England in 1650 . . . caused such a stir and because she seems so relaxed when compared to other Puritan poets. In all ways, she is the “easiest” of Puritan poets, the ease marking her civilized triumph over pioneering conditions which made life terribly hard for a gentlewoman born.

(22–23)

The feminist literary criticism of the 1970s and early 1980s often rehearsed Rich’s 1967 argument, rigidly separating Bradstreet’s works into “public” (read: *imitative, derivative, unoriginal, wooden*) verse and the more acclaimed “personal” poems describing Bradstreet’s family life and experiences. All writing is personal one way or the other; but many critics, such as Kenneth A. Requa, Agnieszka Salska, Jennifer Waller, and Wendy Martin, tended to uphold the public/personal split in Bradstreet’s verse, praising the later poems, but underestimating the artistic achievements of the early ones. The “cleavage of *tone* [emphasis mine] between [Bradstreet’s] earlier works and her later lyrics” (Salska, 117) is a justifiable fact, but the unsettling issue remains that most of the critics who helped to establish Bradstreet’s reputation would also unjustly consider her poetic debut as unforgivably flawed when compared to her later, “truly feminist” artistic output.

Fortunately for Bradstreet, as well as for new generations of readers, some of the most recent feminist literary critics have been successfully questioning Rich’s division, revising perceptions of both the public verse and the more “artistic,” and supposedly more “feminist,” poems speaking about “simple events from a woman’s life,” which, in fact, “were never only about these events” (Baym, 23). According to Nina Baym, “[w]ithout the feminist literary criticism of the late 1970s and early 1980s, hundreds of women writers of the past would still be unknown and the academy would have remained a much more hostile place for women literary scholars.” Most importantly, however, analyzing Rich’s 1970s approach, Baym escapes the stereotypical severing of Bradstreet’s works into two stylistically, thematically, or historically incompatible camps:

In this early moment of retrieval we see a woman writer being divided from her work, or her work being divided from itself. Some of the poems are accepted, others discarded on the grounds of how closely they connect with a ‘woman’s life’—as though the life of a seventeenth-century woman could be mapped onto the twentieth century without distortion. Although Rich’s opposition of the archive to literature suggests that when Bradstreet began to write womanly poems she also wrote better poetry—a claim that can be discussed and

debated on aesthetic grounds—the claim actually rests entirely on subject matter. The familiar argument unscrolls: a woman finds her voice and talent only when she writes about herself, her woman's life; this life excludes politics, science, history, public affairs, intellectual achievement, learning. All these are ceded to men.

(23)

Around the same time as Baym's essay (2001), Tamara Harvey (2000) and Patricia Pender (2001) published two comprehensive articles. Harvey and Pender have found Bradstreet's 1650s *Tenth Muse* inspiring enough to make elaborate and well-supported arguments about how poems such as "A Dialogue Between Old England and New," "In Honour of Queen Elizabeth," and "Of the Four Humours" are both artistically challenging and independent of "the literary tradition [Bradstreet] inherits in several important aspects" (Pender, 115). Recognizing that the lives of seventeenth-century and twenty-first century women display profound differences, both Harvey and Pender advance the claim that Bradstreet was nothing short of a feminist in her time; interestingly, both critics use chiefly the poet's public verse from the 1650 *Tenth Muse* to restate "Anne Bradstreet's Feminist Functionalism" (Harvey, 5).

Branded by Rich as works of "merely archival interest" (Baym, 23), Bradstreet's public poetry has been recently more and more successfully reclaimed as equally feminist oriented as her private verse. To balance this new trend, however, I would like to come back to Bradstreet's personal pieces to point out that their subject matter was not about "wars, of captains, and of kings." Nor do I think they tried to appear "more artistic" and proto-feminist; instead, they attempted to confirm the poet's creative versatility and ability to counter the patriarchal order in a refreshing way. In spite of focusing on Bradstreet's "family" poems, my aim in this chapter is *not* to argue what is or is not part of a woman's tradition or to dismiss the poet's public and historical work. I will discuss "The Author to Her Books" and three of Bradstreet's family poems in order to show how her private experience of being a woman enabled this pioneering artist to become more innovative and ingenious in her time than the male Puritan writers were. As an educated woman but also as a "(m)Other," Bradstreet was privileged to sing "of wars, of captains, and of kings" as convincingly as she did about her household tasks, the latter being not so much only the female domain, but rather the inspirational well from which the Puritan male poets drew with far less subtlety (Taylor's "Huswifery" may be an intricate and splendid

conceit, but its emotional impact on the reader, at least this reader, seems strained and, well, purely Puritan).

In the Lacanian sense, Bradstreet's artistic ambitions resulted in a more fulfilling and comprehensive output. She could operate the language in a way that made her overall writing more complete because it did not depend on the loss of the literal/female strain that the male writers usually discard following the symbolic order. In her public verse Bradstreet effortlessly proves she can write as well as her male contemporaries, most notably in her eulogy of Queen Elizabeth. In her private verse she adds emotional honesty and, as most critics claim, more crafted lines; but first of all she develops and perfects the ability to speak two kinds of language that the public work keeps within the limits of the male convention and literary tradition. I would like to sustain the claim that Bradstreet was really ahead of her time in applying, most possibly unconsciously, the feminist slogan "the personal is political." In addition, I want to answer attacks made by such critics as Paula Kopacz, who states that in spite of being the first published (female) American poet, "Bradstreet was no rebel in the early, public poetry" "[n]or was the private poetry a form of rebellion" (Kopacz, 20). Although Bradstreet's "family" poems were published posthumously, the 1678 edition of her more private verse still appeared in highly unfavorable times for a female writer. Very few women achieved what Bradstreet did in her time, and my argument is that she was and is a successful writer and an important poet because, in the midst of an inhospitable era for women, she found time and imaginative means to master and simultaneously apply two kinds of registers: the figurative and the literal.

II

That American literature prior to the twentieth century consisted predominantly of the works of white male artists is hardly surprising. After all, it rested upon the Puritan literary foundations, laid down by one of the most aggressively patriarchal societies in Western culture. The following passage from John Winthrop's journal aptly summarizes the social idea of women's place in the Puritan world:

[April 13, 1645.] Mr. Hopkins, the governor of Hartford upon Connecticut, came to Boston, and brought his wife with him (a godly young woman, and of special parts), who has fallen into a sad infirmity, the loss of understanding and reason, which had been growing upon her divers years, by occasion of her giving herself wholly to reading

and writing, and had written many books. [. . .] if she had attended her household affairs, and such things as belong to women, and not gone out of her way and calling to meddle in such things as are proper for men, whose minds are stronger, etc., she had kept her wits, and might have improved them usefully and honorably in the place God had set her.

(44–5)

Surprisingly, and in contrast to most European literary fields, this stony paternal ground turned out to be fertile enough to produce one of America's finest female poets: Anne Bradstreet. From the perspective of contemporary women's studies, Bradstreet managed to express herself in *belle lettres* without sharing the fate of Mrs. Hopkins only because she mastered and impeccably applied two kinds of languages: the figurative, the domain of men and their symbolic order, and the literal, the domain of women. As Margaret Homans explains:

[The] positioning of the literal poses special problems for women readers and writers because literal language, together with nature and matter to which it is epistemologically linked, is traditionally classified as feminine, and the feminine is, from the point of view of a predominantly androcentric culture, always elsewhere too.

(651)

Homans goes on to say that “[the] literal both makes possible and endangers the figurative structures of literature. This possibility is always, but never more than, a threat, since literal meaning cannot be present in the text: it is always elsewhere” (651).

The figurative here is not confined to stylistic devices such as metaphors; it also represents male rhetorical, political, linguistic, and psychological positioning within particular systems, or what Lacan calls the “symbolic order.” As Homans argues, “language and culture depend on the death or absence of the Mother and on the quest for substitutes for her, substitutes that transfer her power to something that men's mind can more readily control” (650); that is, the language has always been moved to the position of object by the predominantly androcentric culture, which positions itself as an always-present subject. This law of the Father does not embrace women, but they are expected to comply with it. Some women refuse, and this “has important consequences for the ways [they] rewrite the story of language.” Women view the operation of language as “not based on the privilege of figuration” or “on any concept of representation that requires the absence [. . .] of the object/mother”

(Homans, 654–655). Thus the daughter's experience is both more complete and more complex because it does not depend on loss in the first place.

Although Anne Bradstreet was certainly unaware of the intricacies of feminist psychoanalytic theory, her poetic strategies *embody* the distinction between the two types of languages. She was the first acknowledged and accomplished American feminist writer who proved that being a pious, loving, and devoted wife and mother does not foreclose a literary career and artistic success. Bradstreet paved the way not only for American feminists but also for such acclaimed European writers as Virginia Woolf and Wiesława Szymborska. She spoke two languages at once, privileging neither, to avoid sharing the fate of her contemporary, Ann Hutchinson. Hutchinson, brave enough to comment on the deeds and sermons of men, was also reckless enough to oppose and fight the ages of patriarchy using their own weapons.

Bradstreet found a way to speak her own thoughts as she made use of her partial exclusion from the symbolic order. Skillfully, she combined the figurative and literal aesthetics in a seemingly innocent but also subversive way. In 1965, in her "Foreword" to *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, Adrienne Rich wrote:

Upon the grounds of a Puritan aesthetic either kind of poem won its merit solely through doctrinal effectiveness; Anne Bradstreet was the first non-didactic American poet, the first to give an embodiment to American nature, the first in whom personal intention appears to precede Puritan dogma as an impulse to verse. The web of her sensibility stretches almost invisibly within the framework of Puritan literary convention; its texture is essentially both Puritan and feminine.

(xix)

Bringing the domestic and motherly affairs into the realm of art, Bradstreet opposed the patriarchal order by drawing her readers' attention to the fact that life has more to it than "to sing of wars, of captains, and of kings" or worry about the wrath of God. In "The Author to Her Books," she made her poetic statement in a veiled and seemingly self-deprecating way:

Thou ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain,
 Who after birth didst by my side remain,
 Till snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true,
 Who thee abroad, exposed to public view,

(1–4)

[...]
 At thy return my blushing was not small,
 My rambling brat (in print) should mother call,
(7–8)

[...]
 I washed thy face, but more defects I saw,
 And rubbing off a spot still made a flaw.
 I stretched thy joints to make thee even feet,
 Yet still thou run'st more hobbling than is meet;
 In better dress to trim thee was my mind,
 But nought save homespun cloth i' th' house I find.
(13–18)

Attending and addressing “her household affairs, and such things as belong to women”—the literal domain—Bradstreet fulfills her obligations as a mother and wife. The poem’s extended metaphor, picturing verse as a child born out of the author’s “feeble brain,” appears to prove John Winthrop’s point that a woman will fail if she goes “out of her way and calling to meddle in such things as are proper for men, whose minds are stronger.” However, this superficial reading seems to be masterfully anticipated by Bradstreet in order to placate the patriarchal Puritan ethic. Her scheme here is double edged, that is, coded, subtextual, and double-voiced. First, the metaphor in itself is gratifyingly maternal and hence not overtly competitive with or dangerous to patriarchal literary interests, but serves implicitly as a threat to the figurative. Themes and devices, which are to be the core of her poetry, are also domestic and docile as they are dressed/veiled in “homespun cloth.” Second, Bradstreet’s self-deprecating tone and the implication of the poet’s intention for her poems not to be published evoke compassion—and even understanding—especially in the male audience. However, while earning male understanding and condescending acceptance by her strategy of self-deprecation, Bradstreet also positions herself as a conscious and mature artist aware of the difficulties the writing process and techniques involve (“I stretched thy joints to make thee even feet”). Not only does she introduce her daily experience of the (m)Other as an artistically interesting theme and a refreshing alternative to the tortured clichés of public and historical male verse, but she does so with meticulous care and full responsibility for the quality of the final product. Consequently, “The Author to Her Book” is an example of the finest verse, both stylistically and semantically. Written in perfect iambic pentameter with a well-arranged rhyme pattern, the poem tells

a story of how Bradstreet's works became published against her will, or at least this is the story she wants the audience to believe. Attributing the start of her literary career to her friends, Bradstreet calls them "less wise," which implies her friends' inability to recognize how "ill-formed" indeed her verse was. And this is the poem's joke and truly masterful literary achievement. Bradstreet denies her ability to write well, while writing a gripping poem; but, by addressing her friends' supposed poor judgment, she double checks that her audience buys her self-deprecating tone before she really strikes with her uncommon conclusion:

In critics' hands beware thou dost not come,
 And take thy way where yet thou art not known;
 If for thy father asked, say thou hadst none;
 And for thy mother, she alas is poor,
 Which caused her thus to send thee out of door.
 (20–24)

By being overtly concerned with her offspring's fate, Bradstreet exhibits strong maternal instincts, which has always been expected of women, while making one of the bravest feminist statements in the history of literature. Claiming that her poetry has no Father to turn to, Anne Bradstreet not only admits that she owes nothing to the patriarchal worldly environment, but she also—quite blasphemously—implies that her offspring is the result of a virgin birth. However, because the idea of immaculate conception was God's doing to start with, the Puritan ministers, who might have been potential critics of Bradstreet's poetic attempts, were defeated with their own weapon: an important religious dogma of Christianity could hardly be questioned. Bradstreet, however, seems to enjoy playing with fire; nowhere in the poem does she address this higher power which might have filled her with inspiration. What is more, she assumes the role of the maker of her words, shaping the verse according to her very own, even if imperfect, image. So impeccable and resourceful is the extended self-effacing metaphor of her work as "ill-formed offspring of [a] feeble brain" that it subsequently allows Bradstreet to create her own fatherless artistic realm and counter the Puritan obsession with God's unshakable word by implicitly featuring herself as the Virgin (m)Other. Imploring her verse: "And take thy way where yet thou art not known," the poet indeed sends her verse "out of door" onto a less-traveled and slightly risky track.

Skillfully manipulating her contemporary audience, Bradstreet gets away with her subversive ideas because she makes simultaneous use of both kinds of languages. She takes as her subject that which has been objectified and rendered absent, makes it present and literal, then elevates it to the figurative or symbolic. As a woman she is not limited by vain pride to degrade her mental abilities and creative limitations, which, paradoxically, turn out to be the most powerful weapon in defending her urge to write and speak in an original voice. By appropriating the figurative language of literature and filling it with her personal ideas and experiences, Bradstreet wins the war against patriarchal order without struggle because she does not feel endangered or limited by the law of the Father forbidding men to participate in "such things as belong to women." In contrast to male poets, Bradstreet can relate more naturally to mother-child bonding and consequently recreate the process of birth, development, and final detachment of her offspring/creation, providing her verse with the honesty that male writers can seldom render with equal conviction. The speaker assumes the role of the (m)Other reluctant to be separated from her child/artistic output, which is eventually snatched and "exposed to public view" but still remains shaped according to the creator's supposedly imperfect, female, literal methods, while firmly treading the figurative grounds of artistic achievements. Bradstreet's poetry remains both hers and not hers as it fluently joins the symbolic order without losing the inbred female force of expression.

The final couplet of "The Author to Her Books" explains that the speaker proceeds, though of course reluctantly, to follow her vocation out of poverty. This fits perfectly into the Puritan idea that commercial success is a sign of God's grace, especially since Bradstreet assures the readers that she succeeded against all odds and in spite of her own will. Implying that her literary triumph is involuntary, Bradstreet does not mean, however, that it is uncontrolled or unintentional. Bradstreet uses her wits in quite an uncommon way but with great precision, balancing between survival and death in the field of androcentric literary tradition. Both in her verse and prose writing, she is careful "not [to] set forth [herself] but the glory of God" (Rich, xviii), but she never fails to distance herself from the Puritan self; she recognizes the commonplace events, states her point of view, and manifests her artistic talents. All this, and much more, can be seen in one of Bradstreet's most famous love poems, "To My Dear and Loving Husband." The title implies endless devotion and submission to her spouse, but the lines that follow reveal that the

patriarchally correct phrase is only a cover for passions burning inside this Puritan artist:

If ever two were one, then surely we,
If ever man were loved by wife, then thee;
(1-2)

Bradstreet did not need to imitate metaphysical conceits to convince anyone that she and her husband were soul mates, as simplicity of style was one of the characteristics advocated by Puritanism. As Rich noticed:

Compared with her great successor, Taylor, [Bradstreet's] voice is direct and touching, rather than electrifying in its tensions or highly colored in its values. Her verses have at every point a transparency which precludes the metaphysical image; her eye is on the realities before her, or on images from the Bible. Her individualism lies in her choice of material rather than in her style.

(Rich, xix)

And indeed, it is hard to ask for more transparency, individuality, and literalness while using a word such as "surely," which is charged with actuality and with faith in personal beliefs. In the Puritan era to, be so certain of what one feels toward another human being took courage to express, as corporeality was not what was valued. Every minute of those people's lives was uncertain under God's watchful eye or under most immediate danger coming from the wilderness. One's utmost aim was to pray and prepare one's spirit for the "last onset." Anne Bradstreet, however, was *positive* she loved her husband and not only in the way a good (Puritan) wife should but also as a strong, competitive woman, ready to face and challenge any other woman who would dare to claim their affections were stronger than hers:

If ever wife was happy in a man,
Compare with me, ye women, if you can.
(3-4)

As a devoted wife, she saw herself as the best, better than others, but raising herself above others was not what Christ's teachings were about or what the Puritan congregation approved. However, nothing is as it seems in Bradstreet's verse. According to Edmund Morgan in *The Puritan Family*, Puritan society was based

on the law of the Father/God, which made the husband God's counterpart in the family life; thus the Puritan congregation had no reason to object to the speaker's strong outpouring of emotions for the Lord's earthly counterpart. On the other hand, the speaker seems to be reclaiming her right, traditionally a male privilege, to fight over her spouse. Her challenge sounds like a potential invitation to a fight, warning other members of her sex not to come near her "property." Even if we assume that Bradstreet's passionate earthly emotion corresponds to typically "Puritan religious experience [that] was [frequently] predicated upon desire" (Hughes, 104), the speaker's boisterous feeling of ownership does not really help to draw a parallel between God and husband, or between the insatiable human soul longing to become full by bonding with the Almighty and the human body seeking sexual transcendence. There is no seemingly absent God here, and even if the speaker's love and devotion to her spouse do bring her closer to Him, as the Puritan congregation would have undoubtedly deciphered the image, she does not stress this in her poem; nor does she seem coy about her ability to defend what is hers. However, to camouflage her bold literal statement, Bradstreet ingeniously balances her pride in being the best spouse with a more pious and humble confession, although in figurative language:

I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold
Or all the riches that the East doth hold.

(5-6)

Here, Bradstreet is having her cake and eating it, too. She prizes her husband's love more than the material world of the New Continent or "the riches" of the Old Continent; and, by rejecting earthly goods, satisfies both the Puritans who thought being rich right only when God wishes it so, and those other members of the congregation who, obsessed with the religious and historical idea of being the chosen nation, thought their "riches" were far better than what Europe or Asia had to offer. She thus makes her point in the most blatant and literal way while being figurative and inventive at the same time. Bradstreet succeeds in speaking her mind in the face of the prosperous Puritan ministers, who, living by self-purification and condemning the frailties and emotional behavior of others, would often forget, or would pretend to forget, to live and love. What is more, the speaker is sure she and her beloved husband are among the Elect because they do not need material

objects to prove they are fully satisfied, rich, and hence, chosen to live happily forever:

Then while we live, in love let's so persevere
That when we live no more, we may live ever.
(11–12)

According to Puritan religious beliefs one could live for-*ever* only in Heaven. Hell was a place to suffer and burn in eternal fire (vide “The Day of Doom”). The triple repetition of the word “live,” supported by “love,” also carries a coded, subversive meaning, questioning the Puritan reformed consciousness, which often opposed and punished the outburst of strong individuality as well as the urge to flaunt one’s determination to live life in full. As in many of her other poems, Bradstreet here stresses the pleasures of eternity based on secular/physical life (the literal) rather than her preoccupation with the state of the soul and the ultimate victory of the spirit (the figurative) over the body (the literal), which most male poets in their search for the divine love tend to do. Her idea of an afterlife is strongly concerned with the senses and grounded in the power of earthly love for her spouse. For Bradstreet, eternal life makes sense only when it is preceded by human feelings and the warmth of the body.

In the Puritan world, love and marriage were sacred and fidelity was the ultimate virtue, more valid than life itself. Bradstreet’s poem obligingly confirms these points but by indirectly defying certain religious dogmas, becomes a strong coded feminist statement in the middle of a fiercely patriarchal community. Only seemingly innocent and exemplary of Puritan ideals, the poem can easily be read as blasphemous since the law of the Lord meant the Puritans to use their passions not for pleasure or for artistic inspiration but for procreation alone. Bradstreet’s love, as well as her poetic vision, were not based on the biblical family planner or religious dogmas alone. Neither abstracting her husband from his body, nor portraying him as a God-abiding servant but as a full-blooded man who can be both loved and desired (“My love is such that rivers cannot quench” [7]), and seeing him as a feeling human being who reciprocates those passions (“Thy love is such I can no way repay” [9]), Bradstreet brings love to the level of literal earthly life while not forgetting to drop the soul-appeasing line for her (male) Puritan readers: “The heavens reward thee [her husband] manifold, I pray” (10).

In “A Letter To Her Husband Absent Upon Public Employment,” the topic of love is continued and the introductory lines of

the poem almost duplicate the opening of “To My Dear and Loving Husband”:

My head, my heart, mine eyes, my life, nay, more,
 My joy, my magazine of earthly store,
 If two be one, as surely thou and I,
 How stayest thou there, whilst I at Ipswich lie?

(1–4)

Judging from the first two lines, Freud would probably conclude that Bradstreet was hysterically pining for her husband. The poet, however, knows what she wants and hates the idea of her husband’s being away to the point that she orders rather than asks him to “return” home. Feminist psychoanalytic theorists, who have revised Freud, would see that she claims the literalness of her spouse’s absence:

Return, return, sweet Sol, from Capricorn;

(12)

[...]

I weary grow the tedious day so long;

(18)

[...]

Where ever, ever stay, and go not thence

(23)

When the late Princess Diana uttered similar words during her last BBC interview, begging her royal husband to spend more time with her and their sons, most men in Britain thought she was mentally unstable. Yet Anne Bradstreet was (and still is) praised and acclaimed for her poetry in a society that was more strict than today’s stiff-upper-lip England. Homans would say that Bradstreet did not end up in the asylum or “in the catalogues of Women’s Archives” (Rich, xiii) because her feminine, literal voice was constantly interwoven with the figurative language of patriarchy. Thus, one can distinguish, though maybe not separate, the speaker’s longing for the spiritual, fulfilling union with God’s representative on earth (figurative use) and the more overtly erotic, literal use of the above words enabling Bradstreet to express her inner earthly passions and needs quite openly.

“Although God is never explicitly mentioned in [‘A Letter To Her Husband Absent Upon Public Employment,’],” as Walter Hughes rightly remarks, “Bradstreet’s description of her relation to her husband implicitly recalls the unity that Puritans sought to achieve with Christ” (105). To a Puritan reader this would be an

obvious analogy, and there is no sense in imposing too much theory upon such an interpretation. However, it is also true that, quite ironically, as a female poet Bradstreet had an enormous advantage over Taylor or Wigglesworth, since through expressing her longings for Simon Bradstreet's perceptible presence and warmth she literally coaxes God into the tangible world, "making him [thus] available to the senses" (Hughes, 105). The male poets, while even more insatiable in their desire to be filled with God or God's equivalent on earth, had a hard time inventing images that would not carry the implications of literal homosexuality, thereby violating the law of the Father and making them outcasts of their own orthodox construct: the symbolic/figurative order. As Hughes observes:

[U]nlike Bradstreet, male Puritans could not use their socially sanctioned experiences of love, marriage, and sexuality as a model for the construction of their religious experience; their relation to God was an anomaly in their lives, lives that could not *legitimately* include passionate, erotic attachments to other men. Furthermore, the idea of the soul as an emptiness yearning to be filled by God suggested a receptive sexual role that may have been required of married women like Bradstreet but was strictly forbidden to Puritan men.

(107)

Thus, this "feminine" longing for a sensual intimacy with a male God becomes a threat because it implies a socially unsanctioned literal meaning that should not be present in the text of the Puritan male. Puritan wives cannot literally pose as the earthly equivalent of the divine, but Bradstreet toys with the pattern by posing as a present wife/female speaker who openly demands the presence of her absent husband/unreachable God. What is more, the artist/woman remains at the center of the process as the main creator/speaker/organizer bonding the tangible and intangible through her poetic expression. The speaker admits that her husband/God fulfills her and that her life without him/Him is dull and cold. At the same time, however, she clearly desires what is hers and brings up the image of her children as the most solid proof of the carnal and spiritual union between her and her spouse:

In this dead time, alas, what can I more
Than view those fruits which through thy heat I bore?
Which sweet contentment yield me for a space,
True living pictures of their father's face.

(13-16)

If the commonly approved husband/God analogy aspires to hold its ground, Bradstreet's double register really bears double "fruits" here: she pursues her object of desire using the socially accepted role of wife and (m)Other while also evoking the image of a sexual intercourse that is the primary cause of giving birth to the creation in their father's/Father's (?) image. Although "the mother's body is valued . . . differently" by the symbolic order and frequently left out as the primary/presymbolic threat to this new order (Homans, 654), Bradstreet puts her literally and artistically fertile "I" in the center of the image as the source of love and relation between her and her husband, her and God, her and her offspring who are, in turn, "True living pictures of their father's face." Placing "I bore?" at the end of the line may not be entirely accidental here. The question mark, although pertaining to the extended question in the previous line, may also strike one as a momentary doubt about the reality of the speaker's motherly achievements; but it also seems to deepen the impression that, in spite of the frequent exclusion from the Father's law, Bradstreet is a woman who celebrates her fruit-bearing abilities, her fertile, literal "I," through the figurative boundaries of the symbolic order. Thus, the Father's "heat," both carnal and spiritual, may be a prerequisite to the creative process here, but in the context of this stanza, so is the mother's body.

"[Bradstreet's] sexual/[literal] and spiritual/[figurative] experiences are parallel and mutually enriching, [while, for instance,] those of Wigglesworth are intrinsically connected but hopelessly at odds, creating seemingly pornographic images of God in his mind" (see Wigglesworth's diaries; qtd., Hughes 108). Pleading "My chilled limbs now numbed lie forlorn;/Return, return, sweet Sol, from Capricorn," Bradstreet could be accused of complying with the law of the Father in so far as she may be using such imagery to ingratiate herself with God. However, she is first and foremost a wife and a poet who exploits language and boldly states her wants: "I wish my Sun may never set, but burn/Within the Cancer of my glowing breast." Restricted by the law of the Father, Puritan males (as well as most poets of the pre-postmodern period) could not express similar desires without feeling a homophobic panic or without being accused of sodomy punishable by death in the Puritans' Levitical legal code (Hughes, 107–109).

The reason why Bradstreet's verses are still so gratifying today is because her/the mother's language is not based on the privilege of figuration alone or "on any concept of representation that requires the absence [. . .] of the object"/mother/wife/female

(Homans, 655). Though Bradstreet's images may be said to be far from being immensely imaginative, and certainly the idea of Eliot's objective correlative was a foreign tongue to her, in contrast to her male contemporaries, her poetic expression is more sophisticated as it is not dependent on loss or exclusion in the first place. Her female flesh and poetic body are in natural symbiosis, and this harmony shows in Bradstreet's craft. What is more, the speaker often features herself as the core of an almost holy trinity in which, if she wishes so, she can experience the sensual knowledge of God through her husband's flesh and blood and, thus, in a way, bear the fruits of both. Considering that this is what the male poets of the time wished they could guiltlessly say in their own verse (cf. Hughes), such a reading is not too far-fetched; and as always Bradstreet avoids the wrath of Puritan ministers because on the surface level her metaphors stress what they want to hear: devotion to one's spouse.

The most touching of Bradstreet's poems, "Before the Birth of One of Her Children," is another example of her masterful ability to balance between the literal and figurative. Bearing in mind that the death rate in the colonies was extremely high and that Anne Bradstreet gave birth to eight children, the poet's fear of death before delivering another of her multiple offspring becomes one of the most natural, maternal, and literal topics to be featured in her verse. Nowhere in the poem, however, is the word "fear" written in black and white, and the mastery of this prematurely elegiac lyric lies in Bradstreet's ability to convey not only her own angst but also that of her husband:

How soon, my Dear, death may my steps attend,
 How soon't may be thy lot to lose thy friend,
 We both are ignorant, yet love bids me
 These farewell lines to recommend to thee,
 That when that knot's untied that made us one,
 I may seem thine, who in effect am none.

(7-12)

"These farewell lines," composed and guided by her marital love, prove once more that the essence of the poet's life is based on earthly feelings, which may and often do result in more spiritual emotions and imagery. Initially, the speaker's voice is balanced and comforting, the way a good Puritan wife should address her husband; but as she gradually realizes the consequences of the future literal absence of her person ("I may seem thine, who in effect am none"), the

previously mild voice starts to strike a more organized, commanding and decisive note. It is Bradstreet's common sense expressed in literal voice, not the figurative language of metaphors, which instructs her husband in what he must do if she dies:

If any worth or virtue were in me,
Let that live freshly in thy memory
And when thou feel'st no grief, as I no harms,
Yet love thy dead, who long lay in thine arms.
And when thy loss shall be repaid with gains
Look to my little babes, my dear remains.
And if thou love thyself, or loved'st me,
These O protect from step-dame's injury.

(17–24)

Here, Bradstreet once more is primarily concerned with the senses rather than with spirituality. Predicting the possibility of dying in labor, the speaker/mother is far from the traditional Puritan approach to the state of her soul before death. As her maternal instinct takes over, she becomes down-to-earth, determined, and almost bossy instead of being pious and remorseful. For her, the death of her body (the literal) is first and foremost associated with the misery it will bring to her family, not with the possibility of eternal life in union with God. That is why, instead of passively accepting the uncertain future and patiently waiting for God's solution, she takes control and prepares her beloved for what may come. The way in which the speaker addresses her husband is tender but also practical and uncompromising. She wants to "live freshly" in his memory, and Bradstreet makes sure that the speaker/mother is not to be easily forgotten. Even in this moment of fear and pain, she is not too weak to let her husband get away from his daily family duties or allow him to find a replacement for her. Bradstreet knows she is special, although she never openly praises herself, and her strictness as well as her clear judgment, while probably suffering severely from the side effects of pregnancy, are only another proof how strong a woman she was, both physically and artistically. In other words, Bradstreet claimed her subject-position, refusing to be an object only or to be, as mother, merely an absent presence.

While she certainly did not see herself as a feminist, Bradstreet definitely knew how to speak two languages in order to earn her place as a poet of a permanent stature. A quotation from one of Rich's essays, "Notes Towards a Politics of Location," sums up how difficult it was,

is, and probably will always be for women to combine the figurative and literal in order to be noticed:

Across the curve of the earth, there are women getting up before dawn, in the blackness before the point of light, in twilight before sunrise; there are women rising earlier than men and children to break the ice, to start the stove, to put up the pap, the coffee, the rice, to iron the pants, to braid the hair, to pull the day's water up from the well, to boil water for tea, to wash the children for school, to pull the vegetables and start the walk to market, to run to catch the bus for the work that is paid. I don't know when most women sleep.

(646)

In Bradstreet's work, created in the middle of an atmosphere of extreme patriarchy, the woman had her say once again, and that is why, I think, Bradstreet found time to sleep peacefully. She unconsciously knew she was doing an outstanding job both as the literal mother and the figurative artist. Maybe her family-oriented life does not make her a role-model for today's feminists, but she was on a good way to becoming one.

III

In her essay "The Legacy of 1970s Feminist Criticism," Baym sees Rich's preface as "unjust to Anne Bradstreet . . . [but] unjust for a good cause," for by elevating "the private over the public poems Rich was making an argument on behalf of sensitivity to women's needs in the here and now as Rich then understood them." However, as Baym points out, "in Bradstreet's then and there, it may be that by writing historical and political and scientific and philosophical poetry—rather than poems about the simple events in an ordinary woman's life—Bradstreet was exhibiting a seventeenth-century way of addressing women's needs as she understood them" (23–24). Baym comprehensively adds:

Rich dismissed Bradstreet's poems on public topics because she did not see how they could be part of a woman's tradition. It could be argued that Bradstreet aimed to open up traditions to women, and women to traditions, in a much less separatist sense by writing [figuratively] as a public poet with a woman's [literal] voice. To say that there is more to being a woman than husband, children, illness, and household tasks is not to denigrate these areas of human experience. The point is that it comports with womanhood to read history, to praise one's father for his politics and religion, to be an English citizen, a Puritan, a historian, and intellectual.

(24–25)

While Baym and other feminist critics of the present and future reinvestigate the 1970s search for a “monolithic ‘woman’” (Baym, 29) by directing our attention toward the rejected public work by female writers, it is equally important to keep up the discussion of the private poetic strain as well. What makes a good poet is the totality of her work; thus while successfully retrieving Bradstreet’s “imitative,” “male-identified” verse, and reevaluating the statements they make, we must not forget the womanly (or so we may think) poems. This separation disappears when we realize how the public verse addresses personal, female needs and the private challenges public, male concepts of a womanly life. Bradstreet’s meticulous choice of words and ability to speak two languages were tested and perfected through her political, historical, scientific and philosophical poetry. The “poems about the simple events in an ordinary woman’s life,” which “were never only about these events,” followed posthumously and confirmed Bradstreet’s gift to create multilayered art, teaching us to avoid stereotypical thinking and encouraging critics “to look at works as verbal artifacts [which] may be a procedure whose time has returned, and one which has much to offer feminist analysis” (Baym, 28).

Thus, Pearce’s statement that there is “little or no problem of a specifically artistic purpose” in Puritan verse should probably be revised too, especially in the case of Anne Bradstreet. As Baym says, “[a] more individualized, historically nuanced, aesthetic, and less judgmental approach has the advantage of allowing one to appreciate the sheer number of women who have been writers” (28). On the other hand, the second part of Pearce’s argument confirms my thesis that Bradstreet is most certainly the only poet of the Puritan order “whom we have good cause to remember for what she did, not what she meant to do . . . and because she seems so relaxed when compared to other Puritan poets.” I hope that by this very general/figurative statement Pearce means we “have good cause to remember” the totality of effortless artistic effect in the complex works of the pioneer female poet who *literally* helped to establish American literary culture.

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CHAPTER 2



CREATIVE TENSION: THE SYMBOLIC AND THE SEMIOTIC IN EMILY DICKINSON'S "I HEARD A FLY BUZZ—WHEN I DIED—"

Beth Jensen

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air—
Between the Heaves of Storm—

The Eyes around—had wrung them dry—
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset—when the King
Be witnessed—in the Room—

I willed my Keepsakes—Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable—and then it was
There interposed a Fly—

With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—
Between the light—and me—
And then the Windows failed—and then
I could not see to see—

In *La Révolution du langage poétique* (1974; trans. *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 1984), psychoanalytical theorist Julia Kristeva describes the

formation of the speaking subject as a process. To understand Kristeva's theory, one should first review Jacques Lacan's basic assumptions of linguistic development. According to Lacan, before the acquisition of language, the child, the "pre-subject," in its earliest phase of development, has no sense of self, as it coexists in an Edenic union with the "M/other," the primal or pre-Oedipal M/other, who looms large in the child's earliest phase of development. In this union, all desires are satisfied. In fact, desire does not exist, because the child wishes for nothing, having yet to experience loss. During this stage of development, the pre-subject experiences sensation alone. Subject formation occurs when the Symbolic (the Name-of-the-Father), and referred to in Kristeva as Law, language, and culture, intervenes, shattering the M/other-child dyad. As a result, the pre-subject experiences a sense of loss associated with the acquisition of language and the entrance into culture. The subject henceforth maintains an unarticulated wish for its pre-symbolic union with the M/other. For Lacan's subject, every unsatisfied desire rekindles the original sense of loss; every fulfillment reminds one of the original sense of harmony (cf. Grosz).

In this thumbnail sketch, one can see little difference between Lacanian and Kristevan thought. Kristeva concurs with Lacan's basic assumption that subjectivity and language acquisition are corollaries, yet Kristeva is more precise in her theory. Both agree that the pre-subject experiences loss, then desire for its former idyllic union, as it moves toward language. Unlike Lacan, however, Kristeva believes that fear and horror are intertwined with desire in this complex relationship as the child, the pre-subject, in the process of separating from the M/other, experiences "abjection." Before the Father intervenes, the pre-subject begins to expel or reject the M/other, associating her with those things that incite horror and fear, such as sickness, waste, and carrion (cf. Grosz). The nausea and horror the future subject experiences in its encounter with the "abject," the "cast-off," hint at its earliest effort to create its first sense of self, a point Toril Moi discusses in her introduction to "Freud and Love":

The abject . . . represents the first effort of the future subject to separate from the pre-Oedipal mother. Nausea, distaste, horror: these are the signs of a radical revulsion (or *expulsion*) which serves to situate the "I," or more accurately to *create* a first, fragile sense of "I" in a space where before there was only emptiness. The abject does not fill the void of the "pre-subject," it simply throws up a fragile boundary wall around it. In this sense the abject (the "object" of revulsion) is more a process than a "thing."

Abjection is not a stage through which the pre-subject passes. Instead, it is a process that the pre-subject experiences before and after its entry into language. Abjecting the M/other allows the child to create its first separate space. Moving toward the Symbolic, the pre-subject begins to acknowledge social restrictions as it shuns anything associated with materiality (matter/mater), including bodily waste and decaying flesh. After separation, the *sujet en procès*, the “subject-in-process,” though grounded in the Symbolic, continues to experience unending disruptions in its encounters with the “cast-off.”

Once the M/other-child dyad shatters and the speaking subject emerges, what Kristeva refers to as the Semiotic, the body, the imagination, and the irrational, is perceived only as pulsional pressure on language in the form of “contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, silences and absences” (Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 162). The Semiotic frequently appears in artistic forms that defy traditional linguistic theory. For Kristeva, the repressed maternal power of the Semiotic constitutes the “poetic,” making its “presence known within the Symbolic in the *materiality* of the text—the foregrounding of certain sounds, letters, or puns, anything that subverts the signs’ pretenses as a transparent ‘bearer’ of meaning” (Williams, 57). Such disruptions give writing “its melodic, poetic, and hence maternal aura” (Lechte, 166). Even after the subject acquires language, however, the Semiotic and the Symbolic remain interdependent, a point Kristeva develops in *Revolution in Poetic Language*:

These two modalities [the Semiotic and the Symbolic] are inseparable within the *signifying process* which constitutes language, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, meta language, theory, poetry, etc.) involved; . . . Because the subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either ‘exclusively’ semiotic, or ‘exclusively’ symbolic, and is instead marked by an indebtedness to both.

(24)

Language is heterogeneous, composed of both symbols and semiotic drives, which remain in constant conflict. As a consequence, the “speaking subject” is never fixed; instead, it is always *en procès* (in process/on trial).

In early childhood, the semiotic drives remain near the surface of language in the form of inverted speech patterns and incoherent sounds. Well after childhood, the semiotic pulsions continue to subvert language. The antithetical relationship between the Semiotic and

the Symbolic creates a tension, producing gaps and breaks in creative language, evidenced often in the various “ruptures” that occur within the text. Kristeva contends that these destructive drives and their attacks on the Symbolic serve a creative end. In literary works, diction, syntax, nontraditional punctuation, and unconventional treatment of conventional topics also reflect the creativity and the imagination that Kristeva associates with the Semiotic. Her theory offers a means of textual interrogation that emphasizes the corporeal, material elements of the maternal Semiotic and their influence on art.

As the Semiotic and the Symbolic remain in conflict, tensions materialize within artistic works, particularly those of the avant-garde. John Lechte addresses this subtle subversiveness Kristeva associates with twentieth-century art:

[T]he avant-garde artist will be politically successful to the extent that he or she subverts the existing mode of the symbolic order, rather than engaging in an open ideological confrontation. The avant-garde poetic text in this way becomes a permanent confrontation with the law.

(152)

Kristeva contends that all artistic works contain, to one degree or another, traces of the repressed Semiotic. For example, in Jackson Pollock’s 1952 painting “Blue Poles,” Kristeva sees the breaks, the explosiveness of yellow and the piercing poles of cobalt, as ruptures in art. She describes these nongeometric, nonsymbolic spaces as “semiotic.”

Unlike the nineteenth-century artist standing before an easel, Jackson Pollock, his body in constant motion, dripped, splashed, and poured paint onto the oversized, unstretched canvas. He abandoned conventional painting tools, the brush and the easel, and instead used sticks, cooking basters, and cans. Lechte views Pollock’s paintings, particularly “Blue Poles,” as challenging conventional definitions of “art”: “Pollock’s aim seems to have been to leave his painting entirely open-ended, without boundaries of any kind (no frame)”:

[I]n “Blue Poles” the frame is put in question, and the title has only a tenuous link with the painting. As a result, the place of the spectator is rendered tenuous and ambiguous because the limits of the painting are ambiguous: perspective, order, and representation are challenged.

(127)

Lechte concludes that Pollock’s design and presentation represent a “battle against the symbolic father” (127).

Kristeva emphasizes the twentieth-century avant-garde in her discussions of the Semiotic, yet her theory applies to various nineteenth-century artists as well. Emily Dickinson's style is as innovative as that of the avant-garde, a point few would dispute. The "semiotic ruptures" Kristeva discusses in art abound in Dickinson's poetry, and the elements that made many of the poet's early editors uncomfortable are similar to the disruptions Kristeva associates with the Semiotic. Dickinson's first editor, Mabel Loomis Todd, for example, wrote of the "haunting, compelling effect" of "putting the seven hundred [poems] into shape" (Bingham, 83). In her efforts to "shape," that is, to organize, to structure, to standardize, and to contain Dickinson's unruly offspring, Todd regularized punctuation and grammar, added titles, altered words, omitted lines, and smoothed rhymes. Raymond Mazurek also defends Thomas Wentworth Higginson's recommendation that Dickinson delay publication: "To encounter [Dickinson's] poetry is to come to terms with a difficult interweaving of socially and philosophically subversive meaning and modernist literary form" (123). Jennifer Grant agrees with Mazurek, noting that Dickinson's use of concrete images, contradiction, discontinuous jumps, and open endings are modernist techniques, easily found in literature of the late twentieth century (24). Such unique elements within Dickinson's text suggest a subtle but subversive attempt to undermine the "status quo" as the poet discards the nineteenth-century definition of "art," rejecting poetic "rules" and limits established by her mostly male predecessors. The unconventional punctuation alone reinforces Kristeva's theory that the Semiotic disrupts the logical, linear flow of the text. Such subversiveness increases tension, a key component, according to Kristeva, of the creative process.

Emily Dickinson was not alone in the nineteenth century in her revolutionary approach. Also on the peripheries of society, Walt Whitman, like Dickinson, rejected the traditional tools of his trade. Both Dickinson and Whitman, like Pollack, often left their works "open-ended, without boundaries," and both resisted finality, often concluding without a conclusion. In the 1855 "Song of Myself," Whitman omits the period in the last line. The poem refuses to close as the poet informs the reader, "I stop some where waiting for you" (1346). Whitman also embraces a cyclical pattern in the poem's thematic structure: "Song of Myself" opens with the poet's observing a spear of summer grass, and fifty-two sections later continues with the poet's bequeathing himself to the dirt to grow from the grass he loves: "look for me under your bootsoles" (1340), he says: full circle. No beginning, middle, or end. Like Whitman, Dickinson's

use of punctuation or lack thereof also leaves many of her poems open-ended or suspended. The dash, in particular, creates a sense of suspension, as demonstrated in the concluding lines of the often anthologized “Because I could not stop for Death”: “I first surmised the Horses’ Heads / Were toward Eternity—.” The voice fails to drop as the dash suspends both sound and thought. No sense of finality exists. Such nonconventional elements contribute to the tension Kristeva views as essential for creativity.

Both Dickinson and Whitman write from the margins of culture, both finding their creativity manifested in the ultimate tension existing between life and death, yet thematically, they own few similarities. Patricia Engle suggests that Dickinson “poses the same sort of joyful abandonment to the life-death continuum as Whitman does in ‘Song of Myself’: ‘All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses, / And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier’” (75). Although Whitman and Dickinson may make “circumference” their business, Dickinson does not possess the “joyful abandonment” Engle ascribes to her. In “Because I could not stop for Death,” Dickinson portrays the children at recess “in the Ring”; the “Fields of Gazing Grain”; and the “Setting Sun,” what M. N. Shaw describes as “the three stages of life” (20). Though the children play, the grain grows, and the sun sets, the narrator remains for “Centuries” locked in her state of “Eternity.” Unlike Whitman’s corpse, superb fertilizer for mother nature’s bounty, Dickinson’s narrator serves no generative role. Instead, she remains in a void, reliving over and over the day, centuries ago, when Death arrived unexpectedly. Dickinson never relays what the narrator encounters after she dies. As a potential rejection of God the Father, the symbolic father, Dickinson offers no conventional rendition of an afterlife. Neither does Whitman, but for different reasons. In “Song of Myself,” Whitman’s persona, in constant motion, shakes his “white locks at the runaway sun” and departs “as air” as he effuses his “flesh in eddies” and drifts “in lacy jags” (1337–1338). Dickinson’s narrator, on the other hand, remains in a state of suspension, a point Beverly Dahlen develops in her discussion of “A Word made Flesh is seldom”:

Immortality lies in the gap between the boundary of flesh and the boundary of spirit, the time of this life, a continuous present, or presence bordered by ‘what is not yet, or no longer is,’ put off, or deferred. A present, or presence which is hollowed out, or excavated or undermined by a future which consumes it on the instant replacing it with a memory of that which *has not yet been*, since it has happened already, long ago.

As if stunned, Dickinson's persona remains motionless, moving in neither a cyclical nor a linear direction as the halting dash at the end of the sentence suspends the narrator's progression. Although they split thematically, both poets reject the linear movement associated with the Symbolic. They abandon the conventional structure that imposes a beginning, middle, and end. Each offers a differing perspective of the "hereafter," yet neither ascends to God the Father as they pass from one phase to another.

Because Kristeva's theory of subject formation is based on the interaction between binary opposites, she provides the modern-day critic with an alternative vocabulary to explain Dickinson's extraordinary style and form. Kristeva links the Semiotic with the M/other; the Symbolic with the Father, a dialectic that suggests patterns present within Dickinson's poetry: presence/absence; light/dark; sighted/blinded; materiality/spirituality; inside/outside, to name a few. In her reading of Dickinson in *Emily Dickinson's Gothic: Goblin with a Gauge*, Daneen Wardrop supports this assumption, writing that Dickinson's window "bifurcates the world, aligns perception into terms of inner and outer," and "posits a necessary duality constantly policed by the beholder" (192). Wardrop has more recently asserted that Dickinson predates the modernists in her portrayal of the "jeopardized I." For Wardrop, the "I" is "jeopardized" when it fractures and loses identity, when it, in effect, dissolves. Wardrop posits the "jeopardized 'I'" within the realm of the modernist and postmodernist writer (2003; 143). Kristeva's theory of subjectivity supports Wardrop's assertion: for Kristeva, the modernist text fragments reality and, in doing so, fragments itself, a dissolution of identity that occurs frequently throughout Dickinson's work.

In Dickinson's poem "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—," the narrator's silence, combined with repetition and unconventional punctuation, creates, from a Kristevan perspective, tension. Challenging the language, Dickinson manipulates the words and intersperses images throughout the poem suggestive of conflict and struggle. In fact, the poem establishes several dialectics that create opposition and tension within sixteen short lines: life/death; light/dark; sighted/blinded; assignable/unassignable; spiritual/physical; outside/inside. Her challenge is deceptive, however, because superficially most of her weapons, her words, represent nonthreatening or insignificant entities: light, a window, Eyes, a room, keepsakes, a fly. Yet scattered here and there are potentially threatening elements: Storm, Heaves, Onset, King. Because Kristeva's theory is language-based, focusing on the relationship between self, language, and creativity, it offers

a compelling context for the analysis of Dickinson's voice (or lack thereof) in "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—," a poem that quietly but persistently through its use of boundaries and borders develops the tension Kristeva contends is necessary for the creative process.

The poem begins with the narrator, a corpse, recalling her last moments on earth. Yet within the first two stanzas, the imagery suggests a struggle revolving around this transitional moment. The unidentified narrator regresses to a phase suggestive of the Semiotic as she loses her sight, her eyes, her "I," in essence, her identity. Existing in a pre-Oedipal phase prior to the acquisition of language, the pre-subject has no sense of self. She has no identity separate from the M/other. Similarly, the narrator remains nameless throughout the poem. What may have identified her, her "keepsakes," she wills away: "I willed my Keepsakes—Signed away / What portion of me be / Assignable." The use of legal language within the third stanza "reflects the lawyer's lingo of her father and brother," according to Clarence Gohdes (427). Employing language associated with paternal figures, the narrator commits one final act associated with the Symbolic when she wills away her personal belongings. Soon, nothing will be left to identify her, an ominous point, considering the presence of a fly in the death chamber. Vivian Pollack describes "death" for Dickinson as "the loss of those experiences that have the potential to order meaning" (193). Pollack sees Dickinson's "self" as "a function of its relationships, and once these relationships have been extinguished, there emerges a concept of being without essence" (193). In effect, when the narrator signs away all that is assignable, she severs her ties to the material world; she rid herself of what defines her. Since nothing remains to fill the void, the narrator loses her "self," her "essence." The mourners, the "Eyes," awaiting the arrival of their "King," surround the deathbed as they gaze upon the dying woman. The woman, on the other hand, has no eyes; her "Windows" fail as the "Eyes," not the dying woman, are empowered. The "Eyes," possessing the patriarchal *gaze* Anne Williams describes in *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*, assume control:

But the gaze so constituted is implicitly male, implicitly patriarchal. Freud's theory of the "I" also privileges sight, for the Oedipal crisis is precipitated by the perception of absence, creating therefore the basic categories of the "male/me" and the "not-male/not-me." This first great cognitive division thus splits the world into two unequal categories, "I" and "other."

The possessors of the gaze are in the position of power. The “Eyes” assume the role of the subject; the dying woman, the “object”: “From the patriarchal point of view . . . any woman who becomes an object of the male gaze, may never be anything else but an object” (Williams, 109). From a Lacanian perspective, the *gaze* affects alienation, even more so within the context of the poem since the corpse is the abject, the cast-off, the “not-me.”

The dryness of the “Eyes” suggests the Symbolic since the subject must expel the abject—tears, saliva, excrement, vomit—to establish the “clean and proper body.” Kristeva describes tears as the “metaphors of non-speech, of a ‘semiotics’ that linguistic communication does not account for” (*Stabat Mater*, 174):

Even though orality—threshold of infantile regression—is displayed in the area of the breast, while the spasm at the slipping away of eroticism is translated into tears, this should not conceal what milk and tears have in common: they are the metaphors of non-speech, of a ‘semiotics’ that linguistic communication does not account for.

(173–174)

Tears “re-establish what is non-verbal” as they “return by way of the Virgin Mother,” finding “their outlet in the arts—painting and music—” (Kristeva, *Stabat Mater*, 174). The Madonna in an outburst of pain sheds tears over a corpse. The “Eyes” in “I heard a Fly buzz—,” however, are “wrung . . . dry—.” They are also disembodied, described only as “Eyes,” without any reference to their corporeal presence. Their association to physical matter/mater is restricted solely to the organ of sight, an implicitly male domain. Such an association reinforces the “male/me” and the “not-male/not-me” duality.

“Breaths,” also referring to the mourners, suggests “Voice,” emphasizing the spoken word and its association with the “I,” setting up yet another dichotomous relationship: the mourners and their potential to speak, the dying narrator and her inability to speak. Kristeva associates the feminine with the unspoken and the Semiotic with silence. In patriarchy, woman has no voice; in essence, she is the “silent other.” Although Margo Collins’s application of Chaos Theory to Dickinson’s poem only occasionally overlaps with a feminist psychoanalytical reading, she does associate the term “Breaths” with the “speaking, communicating” aspect of the “self” (44–45), that part of the “dying ‘I’” that perishes within the poem. Vivian Pollack likewise describes the poem as “the epitaph for the self” (194).

The dichotomies established within the first stanza set the tone as the tension escalates. The words “Storm” and “Stillness,” juxtaposed as they are, hint at a growing tension as the narrator describes the “Stillness” in the room, not a peaceful stillness but an unsettling silence: “The Stillness in the Room / Was like the Stillness in the Air— / Between the Heaves of Storm—.” The “Stillness” is threatening, as Collins conveys: “This ‘Stillness’ is a precarious absence of motion or sound, threatening to erupt into tumultuous activity at any moment” as the storm, bordering both sides of the silence, threatens the room’s “fragile stability” (43). The silence exists only “Between” the heaves of storm. It is a temporary silence since the “Storm” will disrupt the calm as the jarring dashes disrupt the text. The word “heave” also suggests the verb “to retch” and its associations with vomit. Signs of radical revulsion, such as nausea and disgust, convey the influence of the Symbolic as the emerging subject creates its first fragile sense of self, yet the narrator, in her linguistic regression, responds with none of these emotions. Instead, the overall tone is flat and emotionless.

Kamilla Denman notes that the dash dominates in poems written during what she calls Dickinson’s “prolific period,” 1860–1863, the period in which “I heard a Fly—” was composed (197). Denman writes that the origin of the dash, the ellipsis, connects it “semantically to planets and cycles (rather than linear time and sequential grammatical progression), as well as to silence and the unexpressed” (197). Though Denman does not apply Kristeva’s theory to Dickinson’s work, her concept of cyclical time supports Kristeva’s theory of “Women’s Time,” cyclical, eternal time, as opposed to historical or linear time:

Female subjectivity would seem to be linked both to *cyclical* time (repetition) and *monumental* time (eternity), at least in so far as both are ways of conceptualizing time from the perspective of motherhood and reproduction. The time of history, however, can be characterized as *linear* time: time as project, teleology, departure, progression and arrival. This linear time is also that of language considered as the enunciation of a *sequence* of words.

(Moi, “Women’s Time,” 187)

Relying on the *OED*’s definition of “to dash,” that is “to strike with violence so as to break into fragments,” Denman contends that Dickinson uses linguistic disruptions to explode “the language by which her culture seeks to limit and define her” (197; 188). She uses the dash “to fragment language and to cause unrelated words to rush

together” in her effort to qualify “conventional language with her own different strains” (197).

The halting breaks, induced frequently by the disruptive dash, contribute to the tension within the text. The first set of dashes within the poem, stanza one, line one, create an immediate break as they abruptly stop the sentence’s linear flow and impede its continuation, creating a jarring effect as they separate one clause from the next: “I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—.” The linear flow of the second sentence, “The Stillness in the Room,” comes to a halt as the subject (“Stillness”) and its verb (“Was”) split, each appearing on different lines. The predicate breaks with its subject and begins line three: “Was like the Stillness in the Air—.” Even the third line, followed with a dash, does not conclude until the fourth line, “Between the Heaves of Storm—,” begins. The unpredictable breaks and incomplete lines create an opening stanza that resists the linear flow of conventional language, a precedent continued throughout the poem. Kamilla Denman notes that Dickinson in the early 1860s becomes “anarchic in her use of the dash, both in terms of its replacement of almost every other mark of punctuation and in its placement between almost every one of the parts of speech” (196). Kristevan theory supports Denman’s contention that Dickinson’s dominant use of the dash fragments language, appropriate for a poem that suggests the regressive fragmentation of the self. Throughout Dickinson’s work, her signature dash frequently disrupts the linear flow of both line and thought.

The locations of the dashes are also unpredictable. Only a single internal dash disrupts the first stanza:

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—
 The Stillness in the Room
 Was like the Stillness in the Air—
 Between the Heaves of Storm

In stanza two, however, three internal dashes disrupt the text:

The Eyes around—had wrung them dry—
 And Breaths were gathering firm
 For that last Onset—when the King
 Be witnessed—in the Room—

In stanza three, two; and in four, three, the dashes follow no pattern, increasing and decreasing at random. The unpredictability in the

poem's punctuation, combined with unusual capitalization, suggests a subtle subversiveness within the poetic form. As the poem progresses and the narrator regresses, the dashes in each stanza increase, decrease, and then increase again until they reach their peak with a total of six in the final stanza:

With Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—
 Between the light—and me—
 And then the Windows failed—and then
 I could not see to see—

The unpredictable dash reflects the narrator's state of confusion as it disrupts logic, reason, and order. In the final stanza, where dashes abound, the narrator loses touch with reality as she describes the sound of the buzz as "Blue," "uncertain," and "stumbling." She is incapable of interpreting the "buzz," a meaningless sound further complicated by the synesthesia of "Blue." The final dash in the final stanza ("I could not see to see—") also defies convention as it resists closure. "I heard a Fly buzz—" never concludes with the standard form of terminal punctuation, the period. The final dash refuses to let the voice fall. Instead, the last line of the poem defies conventional rules that mandate a beginning, a middle, and an end. Pollack writes of Dickinson's representation of death in both "I heard a Fly buzz—" and "Because I could not stop Death" as "an ending that refuses to conclude" (196). Yet the optimistic portrayal of death as prelude to life present in Whitman's poetry is absent in Dickinson's. In Dickinson's poem, Pollack maintains that the speaker is transported from a familiar locale to a "nothingness" (196). The idea of "negative identity, of dying in perpetuity," dominates, and the speaker's "expectations of rebirth" vanish (196). She is left, in essence, in "nothingness" (196).

Dickinson's unconventional capitalization also suggests an upheaval in language. Like the dash, it is unpredictable. The placement of a word, whether at the beginning or the end of the sentence, is irrelevant: "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died— / The Stillness in the Room." Dismissing the rules of language, Dickinson capitalizes letters where and when she wants. Nouns are capitalized but so are verbs even when they are embedded within a line: "I willed my Keepsakes—Signed away" (9). Her selection of words also demonstrates little if any consistency. The "K" in "King" is capitalized but so is the "F" in "Fly." Like Whitman, Dickinson refuses to privilege one over the other. Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman flouts convention,

embracing all marginalized groups, including the slave, the prostitute, and the venereal. In "Song of Myself," he defiantly embraces the lunatic, the "woollypates," the "opium eater," the prostitute, the cotton-field drudge, and the cleaner of privies, all marginalized by society (286; 304). He embraces the victors and the vanquished; the wicked as well as the righteous: "I play not a march for victors only. . . . I play great marches for / conquered and slain persons," (362) and "for the wicked just the same as the righteous" (373). Within six juxtaposed lines, he embraces the President and the opium eater, the bride, and the prostitute (303–308). Whitman's Great Chain of Being is horizontal, not vertical, as he sings his song for presidents, prostitutes, and poke-weeds, elevating not one above the other. Dickinson achieves the same goal more subtly with her use of capitalization. Before the reader can place significance on the capital "K" in "King," associating it with "God," Dickinson capitalizes the "F" in "Fly." Though Whitman and Dickinson's thematic reasons for placing each word on equal footing with the other may differ, both discard long-held traditions.

Dickinson continues her dialectic when she contrasts the light with the dark. The "King" and the "light" confront the "Fly" and the dark, terms associated with the Symbolic and the Semiotic, respectively. Tension escalates as the mourners with eyes dried and breaths held "firm" anxiously await "that last Onset—when the King / Be witnessed—in the Room—." The mourners gather "firm" for the "Onset" as if bracing for war. "King," with its patriarchal, religious overtones, suggests God the Father, the judgmental, stern Oedipal Father Kristeva associates with the Symbolic. Kelly Oliver notes that this figure of the "stern Father cannot coax us away from our maternal shelter even if that shelter threatens to devour us. This is why we need the loving father as a support against abjection" (83). Yet the "loving father" never materializes in "I heard a Fly buzz—." The narrator and the Eyes wait for a sign of affirmation, yet none appears. All they encounter is a "Fly." The narrator has no outward response, even though the emphasis on the fly suggests a shock, similar to that experienced by the narrator in "Because I could not stop for Death." The dying persona could very well respond with Granny Weatherall's concluding lines: "God, give a sign! . . . For the second time there was no sign. . . . Oh, no, there's nothing more cruel than this—I'll never forgive it" (Porter, 447). Dickinson's narrator, however, does receive a sign, a crueler indictment, perhaps, than that inflicted on Granny Weatherall.

The overall tone of the poem is flat, somewhat melancholic, suggestive of the narrator's regressive phase. As Lechte writes,

“Melancholia, and its more temporary variation, depression, . . . constitute an example of an unsuccessful separation from the mother” (185). Kristeva adds that without the loving father, we remain suffering “extraterrestrials,” “wanting for love” and “burdened with emptiness” (*Tales of Love*, 382; 378). To triumph over sadness, the self must “identify no longer with the lost object but with a third party—father, form, schema” (Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 23). In Whitman’s world, in a poem such as “Song of Myself,” the fly and its offspring would remind the poet of life: the fly to the maggot to the corpse to the fertilizer to the rose in an unending, intoxicating circle of life. In Dickinson’s “I heard a Fly buzz—,” the narrator experiences none of Whitman’s joy or bliss or *jouissance*. When the fly blocks the light, the narrator, along with the reader, is left in a void, “burdened” with “emptiness” (cf. Spenser, Ford, Rogers, Weisbuch).

Life and light and their associations with the “King” contrast with death and darkness as the fly hovers over the corpse. The abject, in this case, the corpse, is both dead and alive, yet it has none of the celebratory associations of Whitman’s deteriorating body: “And as to you corpse I think you are good manure, but that does not offend me, / I smell the white roses sweetscented and growing / I reach to the leafy lips. . . . I reach to the polished breasts of melons” (1293–1296). Instead, a quiet uneasiness permeates the four short stanzas. In 1955, Gerhard Friedrich notes that the fly serves as a reminder of “man’s final, cadaverous condition and putrefaction” (35), and Clarence Ghodes, twenty-three years later (with the assistance of an entomologist), identifies the fly as a bluebottle fly, a type of blowfly, which is “especially fond of laying its eggs in dead flesh” (428). The deterioration and possible consumption of the corpse by maggots emphasize the precarious grasp the subject has over its own identity and physical boundaries. The mere presence of a fly in the death chamber affirms the body’s mutability (cf. Ciardi).

The speaker, too, acknowledges her own mutability when she signs away that portion of her that is “assignable”: “I willed my Keepsakes—*Signed* away / What portion of me be / *Assignable*” (emphasis added). To sign something, that is, to identify, to name something, is to control the object named; yet the narrator notes that not all is “Assignable,” that is, not all is identifiable, nameable, controllable. Toril Moi notes in *Sexual/Textual Politics* that definitions and names are “constraining”:

[French feminists] . . . see such labelling activity as betraying a phallogocentric drive to stabilize, organize and rationalize our conceptual

universe. They argue that it is masculine rationality that has always privileged reason, order, unity and lucidity, and that it has done so by silencing and excluding the irrationality, chaos and fragmentation that has come to represent femininity.

(160)

The narrator wills away her keepsakes, her valuables, those objects that identify her and tie her to the Symbolic, yet she cannot sign away her body; it is “unassignable” since the flesh, unlike the keepsakes, will rot, a point emphasized all the more by the presence of a fly. She never imposes a name upon the unnameable, the uncontrollable. Instead, her body remains the antithesis of “What portion of me be / Assignable—.”

More than any other object, Kristeva associates the corpse with the abject, a point she develops in *Powers of Horror*:

Refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. . . . There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit cadere, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, “I” is expelled.

(3–4; her emphasis)

The abject is “the in-between, the ambiguous”; it disturbs “identity, system, order” since it respects no boundaries (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 5). It threatens the subject’s identity as it calls into question physical borders. Mary Loeffelholz contends that the borders and boundaries Dickinson creates “exist to be breached” as they “make their existence (often painfully) felt through a breaching or violence” (111).

In “I heard a fly buzz—,” borders are indeed breached as the fly disturbs the silence with its buzz, creating a particularly unsettling sound in the presence of a corpse. The ability of the maggot to invade the shell, the physical border created by flesh, emphasizes the disintegration of boundaries. The Symbolic can maintain itself only by maintaining its borders; the maggot-laying fly emphasizes the fragility of such boundaries. Before death, lines between body and not-body exist: food, not yet the body, is consumed; feces, no longer the body, are expelled. At death, however, the once living body becomes the corpse, the waste. In Kristevan theory, as the child progresses in its development, images

associated with the abject such as corpses and carrion incite fear. The narrator, in this semiotic-like state, however, does not respond as the speaking subject. What should repulse no longer does. As she regresses, she is not repelled by the fly and the flesh-eating maggots it will produce:

[Abjection] is an extremely strong feeling which is at once somatic and symbolic, and which is above all a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from inside. So it is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility of doing so. . . .

(Kristeva, "Interview," 135–136)

At the moment the narrator alludes indirectly to the body (she speaks of "What portion of me be / Assignable—," a phrase that acknowledges the body by excluding it), "There interposed a Fly—," the "external menace" Kristeva describes that "may menace us from inside," as its maggots feast on decaying flesh, yet the narrator shows no signs of revulsion even though she herself will be devoured. Unlike the emerging subject who fears falling back under the sway of the M/other, the subject-in-reverse has no response when it encounters the abject.

Kristeva writes in *Powers of Horror* that the abject continues to challenge the established order even though it has been banished:

A certain "ego" that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven [the abject] away. . . . [The abject] lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the [superego's] rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master.

(2)

"Getting rid" of the abject "is out of the question— . . . one does not get rid of the impure" (Kristeva, *Powers*, 28). The fly, from "its place of banishment," the "outside," has infiltrated the sickroom as it darts in and out between the light and the "Eyes." As the "Eyes around" await the arrival of the "master," the King, the pesky, filthy fly intercedes, disrupting expectations.

In the final stanza, it is the fly that overthrows the King, suggesting the narrator's final regression: "—and then it was / There interposed a Fly— / . . . / Between the light—and me—." As the narrator loses her grip on reality, her diminishing senses perceive the fly's buzz

as “Blue,” “uncertain,” and “stumbling.” As her senses become “uncertain,” she enters a realm of ambiguity and confusion. As noted earlier, the occurrence of the dash reaches its peak in the final stanza, appearing six times, four times in the concluding stanza’s first two lines alone. Alan Helms, in his reading of “After great pain, a formal feeling comes—” writes that the abundance of dashes in the poem’s final line (“First—Chill—then Stupor—then letting go—”) slows the tempo of the poem, suggesting the slow process of freezing to death (188–189). Likewise, in “I heard a Fly buzz—,” the prevalence of the dash (sixteen in “I heard a Fly” compared to eleven in “After great pain”) halts the pace of the poem throughout as the narrator describes her dying day. The insurgence of the dash, halting the flow from one word to the next, creates a disrupting, jarring effect as the narrator flows in and out of consciousness. With modern-day technology, one might compare the erratic dash to an EEG: a flat line, then a burst of energy, followed by a flat line, until the brain’s activity ceases and all that remains is a line.

Infantile repetition also escalates in the last six lines as her eyes / I close. In her regression to a pre-symbolic state, the narrator loses her sense of self. She returns to the Semiotic as a child who has yet to obtain identity: “—*and then* it was / There interposed a Fly— / . . . / *And then* the Windows failed—*and then* / I could not *see* to *see*—” (emphasis added). The repetition of the phrase “and then” emphasizes the child-like characteristics of the narrator’s speech as she regresses. The rules of language are meaningless. In death, the “I” does not exist; even the “Windows,” the eyes, fail, leaving the narrator unable to see as all sense of self vanishes. The fly separates the narrator from the light as she recedes into darkness, vanishing into “a kind of epistemological nihilism” (Wardrop, 1996; 192).

The poem revolves around a state teetering between consciousness and unconsciousness: light and dark, life and death. As images of storms and wars and kings suggest, a struggle ensues at the juncture, the dividing line, as the narrator continues to experience a futile pull toward the “light.” Moi describes this marginal positioning of the “other”:

If patriarchy sees women as occupying a marginal position within the symbolic order, then it can construe them as the limit or borderline of that order. From a phallogocentric point of view, women will then come to represent the necessary frontier between man and chaos; but because of their very marginality they will also always seem to recede into and merge with the chaos of the outside.

(*Sexual/Textual*, 167)

Likewise, the narrator recedes into darkness, confusion, and ambiguity. In this return to the womb/tomb, the narrator's reality crumbles. The eye/I no longer functions: the dying woman hears rather than sees the fly before she slides back into the corporeal abyss as the "female sexual organ" is changed into the ear, "an innocent shell, holder of sound" (Kristeva, *Stabat Mater*, 172–173). It is not patriarchy's "Word" or the strains of heavenly music that fill the narrator's dying ear. Instead, it is a buzz, a "Blue—uncertain stumbling Buzz—." As Lechte notes, the death drive, the ultimate semiotic impulse, underlies the poetic rhythm: "The death drive (total expenditure of energy) emerges at the point where communicative language is about to be extinguished" (144). Similarly, the fly's buzz is audible just before the narrator's death. Death and life coexist in a creative tension: the interaction between the Semiotic and the Symbolic evokes both death (corpse) and life (maggots). Within the image of the fly, each state is captured: the corpse serves as the vehicle for maggots and the maggots, no matter how revolting, thrive on their bounty. The fly, like the abject, mesmerizes rather than repulses the self-in-reverse as it appears in three of the four stanzas.

The narrator never offers a soothing description of the hereafter. As Michael Ryan notes, the ultimate twist within the poem may suggest that the here is better than the hereafter: "the 'Heaven above' may pale compared to the 'Heaven below'" (17), an unconventional point of view, considering the popular attitude toward death and salvation in the nineteenth century. "I heard a Fly buzz—" presents a twist to the typical deathbed scene the Victorians embraced as they wept over Little Eva's excruciatingly long farewell in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Caroline Hogue notes that the stereotypical deathbed scene would involve the gathering of friends and family to witness the "grand act of passing" (26). The Redeemer would hover over the bed with outstretched arms as the departing soul, with one last burst of energy, would testify to the Divine Presence. What hovers over the dying persona's bed, however, is a fly, and a carrion-loving blowfly at that.

In the final stanza, the fly intervenes between the narrator and the light. Dashes break the flow of each line, creating a jarring, halting effect as the narrator tumbles into the dark abyss: "And then the Windows failed—and then / I could not see to see—." In her discussion of Dickinson, Beverly Dahlen asserts that "paradisical" elements such as "Heaven" and "Eden" in Dickinson's works replace the sensation of loss the emerging subject experiences and project "a possible future restoration: Utopia" (19). In "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—," however, little comfort is offered to the regressing

subject by such “paradisiacal” elements: instead of the “King,” a fly; instead of Utopia, darkness. There is no indication of an Edenic after-life, just the blue uncertain reverberation of a fly’s buzz.

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CHAPTER 3



FATHER, DON'T YOU SEE THAT I AM DREAMING?: THE FEMALE GOTHIC AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Diane Long Hoeveler

I

In the course of reading and teaching literature for many years, I have been impressed with the ways that literary works attempt to disguise the fact that they are often coded personal sagas, *angst*-filled daydreams committed to paper and shared with the reading public. Obviously, literary works are also ideological statements, historical documents, and aesthetic productions, but they still remain in essence the work of individual human beings, all of whom have a personal history, a childhood, parents, and loved ones who have supported or betrayed them, or, most likely, some combination of the two. And yet critics are hesitant to discuss, let alone analyze, the personal content in literary works, while authors are often all too quick to conceal, obfuscate, and deny any autobiographical materials in their works. Some artists have, however, over the years spoken sensitively about these matters, and I cite a very few here to frame this chapter. The first is Richard Wright, the African American novelist, who, in an unpublished essay entitled "On Literature," observed: "All writing is a secret form of autobiography" (6). The second example is an observation by the early twentieth-century artist Georges Braque, who noted: "Art is a wound turned to light" (3). And the third

statement is from D. H. Lawrence, who noted that “one sheds one’s sicknesses in books—repeats and presents again one’s emotions, to be master of them” (90). Mastering trauma through artistic production, transforming the wounds of life by converting them into recognizable phantasies—these gestures would appear to form the core of writing as well as reading visual and verbal creativity.

One of the first questions that this volume attempts to address is, How does one approach creativity as a manifestation of an artist’s individual’s psyche? As the Introduction notes, Freud considered creativity to be an adult extension of imaginative play, but he also talks at length about how phantasy is deeply interwoven with trauma. A sort of equation begins to emerge here: if creativity is psychic play, perhaps that psychic play is most like what we recognize as phantasy, and if phantasy is a response to trauma, then literature is written by individuals who have turned their traumas into the phantasies that we recognize as “art.” Jonathan Culler makes a similar point when he discusses the nature of Freudian narratives: “One may maintain the primacy of the event; it took place at the appropriate moment and determined subsequent events and their significance. Or one can maintain that the structures of signification, the discursive requirements, work to produce a fictional event. At this point Freud admits the contradiction between these two perspectives, but refuses to choose between them” (Culler, 180). What that last quotation attempts to get at is the chicken and egg question of what comes first: trauma or fantasy. For Freud, either neurosis sprang from unconscious phantasies produced by conflicting internal and infantile sexual instincts or neurosis was the product of traumas, that is, outside intrusions on the psyche in the form of child abuse or seduction. (cf. “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”), Freud never decided conclusively between these two theories, and I would admit that I have been dwelling and oscillating on the issue as it manifests itself in female gothic fiction. This chapter will examine two important female gothic novels and ask if they reveal to us how we can understand creativity as a manifestation of trauma or phantasy or, finally, some combination of both.

I would like to begin by presenting an abbreviated summary of the much more complex thesis of Elizabeth Bronfen’s *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, a work that speaks to the concerns of the female gothic in a number of interesting ways. Bronfen’s major claim is that psychoanalysis has consistently attempted to foreground the role and importance of the father in the construction of the ego because of an unacknowledged need to root out, displace, and marginalize the mother. But the displacement of the mother from

both Freud's and Lacan's accounts of ego formation actually serves to simultaneously aestheticize the woman's body as an object of death at the same time it charges that body with intense and diffuse anxiety. And strange as it may seem, the same sort of *fort-da* game described by Freud in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" is played out repetitiously in the female gothic novel. As a feminist revision of Freud, Bronfen attempts to move the emphasis away from Freud's construction of the uncanny female body and instead toward an analysis of his (and society's) misogynistic assumptions. For Bronfen, the uncanny "always entails anxieties about fragmentation, about the disruption or destruction of any narcissistically informed sense of personal stability, bodily integrity, immortal individuality" (*Over Her Dead Body*, 113).

In the grip of the power of the uncanny, the female gothic author keeps disposing of the mother, only to reel her (usually dead) body magically back into the text for obsessive view over and over again, revealing that in both the psychoanalytic and the female gothic traditions the same wound, the same psychic trauma is being fingered. That wound consists, I think, in the loss of the patriarchy, the loss of the mother as a figure of power or even a fantasy of power in a society that no longer values her role and importance. The syndrome that I am describing here is similar, in fact, to what Lawrence Kirmayer calls the "landscapes of memory, the metaphoric terrain that shapes the distance and effort required to remember affectively charged and socially defined events that initially may be vague, impressionistic, or simply absent from memory" (175).

The memory of the mother's power may be dim, but female writers vaguely recall it, if only in distorted recollections of their childhoods. The "landscape of memory," however, also emerges when literary texts by women use dreams as coded, heavily freighted representations of actions that cannot occur on the explicit surface of a text. The gaps in the narrative that we can observe in so many women's novels can be explained partly by recognizing that women writers use silence, partial conversations, or elliptical discourse to convey or merely hint at a trauma that the text can only circle warily. The sons of psychoanalysis and the daughters of the female gothic both mourn the passing of the mother's body from view and control, and so they repetitiously delineate texts that symbolize their fantasized construction and reconstruction of the maternal, aesthetically potent, and deadly beautiful body. Somehow these two movements—psychoanalysis and the female gothic—both participate in some profoundly similar manner in delineating an aesthetics of loss that occurs in the private theatre of the wounded psyche. And they both find themselves spiraling into

and around each other in yet another attempt to salvage the mother's body and, by extension, her control and power over society.

II

But let me turn now to an examination of Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* and then theorize about the role of trauma, fantasies, and dreams in Radcliffe's textual terrain. The heroine of this novel, Adeline, is not merely dispossessed like most female gothic heroines; she is literally passed from man to man in this novel as just so much excess and inconvenient baggage. When the novel opens she is being handed by one hired ruffian into the confused and baffled hands of a fleeing criminal, M. La Motte, who takes her with him and his wife to a deserted abbey in the forest. Later La Motte hands her to the Marquis de Montalt, the owner of the abbey, who also coincidentally happens to be Adeline's uncle, the murderer of her father and the usurper of the estate she rightfully should possess. Alternately she is protected by Theodore Peyrou, the romantic love interest and therefore the frequent target of stray swords from various "father"-figures throughout the text. The names and identities of all of these other men are less significant than the fact that Adeline exists in this text as a fetish of femininity, an exchange commodity passed between powerful men who use her as a pawn in their own vaguely homosocial schemes. These schemes, of course, involve unpleasant activities such as fratricide, theft, blackmail, and the usual unsavory and unsubtle ploys that men use to gain wealth and status in this male-dominated society.

The first and most important characteristic of Adeline as gothic heroine, however, is the fact that her parentage is a source of sorrow for her. She believes that her mother died when she was seven years old, leaving her to be raised in a convent. At the age of eighteen her father, a heartless tyrant, demands that she become a nun. When she objects, her father "denounced vengeance on [her] head if [she] persisted in disobedience" (I, 80). We are here in the terrain of terror at leaving the father, even if, as in this case, it is merely the idea of a bad father she finds herself forced to renounce. Adeline wants nothing more than to be a dutiful daughter, but she is instead compelled reluctantly and unwillingly into the role of female gothic heroine adventurer, and so the novel can begin in earnest. Adeline, like Julia, the heroine of Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* before her, plays the part of the oedipal detective, uncoding the saga of this dysfunctional family romance and once again proving that masculine hubris, greed, and ambition are no match for feminine "genius."

Using Adeline's dreams as clues to the murder mystery she must solve stands as perhaps the most original innovation Radcliffe develops in this work. Dreams have long functioned in literature as privileged sites of meaning, transactions wherein highly charged signifiers intersect with highly ambiguous signifieds. Adeline's dreams are a treasure trove of adolescent anxiety. Here is her narration of the first one:

I thought that I was in a lonely forest with my father; his looks were severe, and his gestures menacing: he upbraided me for leaving the convent, and while he spoke, drew from his pocket a mirror, which he held before my face; I looked in it and saw (my blood thrills as I repeat it), I saw myself wounded and bleeding profusely. Then I thought myself in the house again; and suddenly heard these words, in accents so distinct, that for some time after I awoke I could scarcely believe them ideal,—“Depart this house, destruction hovers here.”

(I, 90)

The images here are classic set pieces: the false father holding up the mirror to his daughter, the daughter wounded, beaten, and bloody. Anxiety and blatant fear of menstruation are imaged here in ways that the author herself seems not to recognize. The house that holds “destruction” can be read most obviously as the heroine's own body, changing without her willful consent, a transformation that is instigated in some malicious and threatening manner by the father himself. But the dream can also on some level be read as a seduction scene, with the father initiating the daughter into the bloody terrain of her own deflowered body. When Adeline bleeds she positions herself as the victim of a quasi-castration, a bloody mutilation at the father's hands (cf. Bronfen, 176). The dream on some level asks, Why have I been wounded? while it seems we would not be overreading to imagine that Adeline is actually asking herself: how can I cut/castrate my father and not be blamed for the act?

Very shortly, however, we are told that the heroine finds herself in her chamber with a “locked door” (I, 91), and that men are coming in through this very door. At first we think Adeline is dreaming, then men actually do appear and kidnap her, only to deliver her once again into the hands of M. La Motte. Locked doors on the heroine's bedchamber loom large in gothic novels, and they would appear to be almost too comical to take seriously. Were it not for their persistent presence, that is, we might be tempted to merely dismiss the locked doors as blatant tropes for a dread of genital sexuality. But throughout

these novels the daughter locks the door not simply on her own sexuality, but on her parents'. The gothic heroine seeks not simply to reject motherhood itself, but to obliterate all mothers, all fathers, all families. The locked bedroom door denies generation in ways that reveal the real anxiety motivating the ideology. The body that defines the gothic heroine's essential nature—that tie her to the emotions, sentimentality, blood, childbirth, milk, Nature—that body has to be not only denied but also destroyed by the conclusion of the text. The mirror the father holds up to his daughter bespeaks her worst fears: she is flesh and therefore mortal; he is reason and spirit and therefore immortal. She desires nothing less than to become a man or, at the very least, a manly woman.

If the first dream served as a *précis* for the first section of the novel, Adeline's second dream introduces her to the next section of the text's action. In this second dream she sees herself in a large, old chamber of the abbey, long deserted and mysterious. Suddenly she hears a low voice calling her. When she attempts to find the source of the voice, she sees a dying man, stretched on a bed, his face possessing "an expression of mildness and dignity." Suddenly his features convulse, and he grabs her hand:

she struggled in terror to disengage herself, and again looking on his face, saw a man, who appeared to be about thirty, with the same features, but in full health, and of a most benign countenance. He smiled tenderly upon her, and moved his lips, as if to speak, when the floor of the chamber suddenly opened, and he sunk from her view. The effort she made to save herself from following awoke her.

(I, 239)

In this dream we can see charted the psychic movement away from the false father and to the true, lost, and dead father. His youth and attractive appearance are ambivalently undercut by his sinking from view just when he attempts to speak to his daughter. It is his doomed fate that draws the daughter to him; it is the pull of the death instinct, the thanatoptic impulse that lures her to his side, a side that must be rejected if she is to survive where he did not.

Before Radcliffe gives us time to fully interpret this dream, however, we are presented with the third dream. In this one Adeline finds herself in winding passages of the abbey at dusk, unable to find a door. She hears a bell toll, and then the confusion of distant voices. Lost and trapped, she suddenly sees a light and tries to follow it. It leads her to a man who looks as if he is trying to take her to a funeral.

She is afraid to follow him, but he suddenly turns on her and begins to chase her. Her terror awakens her.

As if three dreams were not sufficient textual overload, Radcliffe quickly gives us a fourth, and Adeline returns to sleep as if to solve the mystery. In this final dream she follows the same mysterious man into a room with black wall hangings, prepared for a funeral. At the center of the room stands a coffin, and while she gazes at it she hears “a voice speak as if from within”:

The man she had before seen, soon after stood by the coffin, and lifting the pall, she saw beneath it a dead person, whom she thought to be the dying chevalier she had seen in her former dream: his features were sunk in death, but they were yet serene. While she looked at him a stream of blood gushed from his side, and descending to the floor, the whole chamber was overflowed; at the same time some words were uttered in the voice she heard before; but the horror of the scene so entirely overcame her, that she started and awoke.

(I, 242)

These four dreams, strung together as a sort of crude nocturnal melodrama, reveal the history and fate of Adeline's father, imprisoned in the abbey by his avaricious brother, the evil Marquis de Montalt, and then murdered by him and left to molder in a trunk. But there is also in this dream an element of sadistic voyeurism evidenced in the need of the daughter to see the father bloody and wounded and standing as victim in her stead. If the first dream positioned the daughter as the bloody victim, the fourth dream neatly reverses the power equation between the two. And once again castration imagery merges with a quasi-seduction scene, so that in some sense the daughter seems to be asking another version of the question she began to formulate, albeit in muted form, in the first dream: like all primal phantasies, this one recurs to the myth of origins, so that the daughter is actually asking a simple and yet haunting series of questions: How has my father's death made my life possible? How have I fed on and consumed my father's energy? And note how very strange it is that the mother and the maternal body as the true source of origins are never mentioned by this very paternally identified daughter.

Sent by fate to uncover and punish this horrible deed, Adeline has been taken to the one spot in the world where she can solve the crime of her father's murder. And not only does she have the moral force of justice and the inexorable laws of fate on her side, she also has the residue of her psychic wounds—her dreams—to lead her to the murderer. She may sleep no more that night, but do not think the female gothic

heroine is not up to the task of decoding her dreams and solving the mystery of her father's murder and her own disinheritance. Notice, however, how the stock beating phantasy—I am being beaten by my father—is transformed here in a most peculiar manner: my father is being beaten by my uncle.

Adeline's dying father, his side pierced and bleeding, functions here as a Christ-like figure who leads her on to uncover the truth and unmask and punish evil. The dying father as Christ-figure, weak, wounded, ritualistically sacrificed so that his true heir—the meek gothic daughter—can inherit the earth, this cultural construct is a potent one because it speaks to the female reader's sense of self-importance, her self-divinization. If Christianity was to survive as a cultural force into the modern era, it was because it was feminized, the Christian Everyman now a young woman, a daughter seeking her identity in an increasingly godless universe. Christian melodrama intersects here with gothic trappings, and the result is intended to be irresistibly attractive to its female reading audience. Adeline as gothic heroine is both wounded and a voyeur of woundings, pursuer and pursued, active and passive in a way that recalls Freud's comments on the bisexual nature of hysterical phantasies. It is typical of hysterics, however, to engage in histrionic attacks for effect, so that frequently they will play out both masculine and feminine parts, mimicking both the subject and the object of mutilation and seduction. Adeline appears trapped in just such a scenario. As a hysteric, however, Adeline has no choice but either to slip deeper into a sort of paralyzing melancholy or to act out the mystery of her origins and solve the crime. Because she is a gothic heroine, she acts.

If the four interlocking dreams are the dramatic highpoint of the first volume of the novel, the discovery of the rust-stained dagger, the actual murder weapon, and the "obliterated" manuscript form the crux of the mystery in the second volume. With the dreams we are in the very rudimentary realm of the unconscious mind; we are, in short, within the psyche and soul of the female gothic heroine. But as she is a heroine, her internal world is an exact replica of her external situation. Inner reality mirrors outer reality in a reciprocity that we know is only characteristic of the universe of moral allegory. With the dagger and the tattered manuscript, we move to the level of proof, the material clues that allow Adeline to close in on her suspect, the Marquis. Note, however, how the dreams have already provided her with only the bare outlines of the murder: the who, what, where and how of the crime. All she needs to discover is the motive, and that is provided when she reads the manuscript, the written record of her father, kept in his own hand as he faced murder by his own brother. This device—the partial,

fragmented manuscript—became, after Radcliffe, a stock gothic trope. In fact, the unearthed manuscript was such a stock convention that it was both ridiculed and valorized in several later gothic (or antigothic) novels.

When Adeline finally does manage to find a moment of privacy, she repairs to her locked chamber and spends the dark and dreary nights there reading the mysterious manuscript. After one particularly ominous section of text, Adeline chances to glance up and see a mirror, but “she feared to raise her looks towards it, lest some other face than her own should meet her eyes; other dreadful ideas and strange images of fantastic thought now crossed her mind. A hollow sigh seemed to pass near her. ‘Holy Virgin, protect me!’ cried she” (II, 52–53). Reading her father’s manuscript has produced just this dislocation of identity; the face she fears to see in the glass is, we suspect, the face of her father, the murder victim. Later gothic heroines will see their faces in the faces of others, and this mirroring is not for them a pleasant phenomenon (for instance, in *Mysteries of Udolpho* Emily St. Aubert thinks that she resembles the mysterious Sister Agnes, or Catherine II’s resemblance to her mother is considered uncanny and unnatural by Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*). Again, the rabid fear of childbirth and the rejection of motherhood—seen on some deep level as the loss of the pristine self in another—are evidenced here all too clearly. Fear of motherhood as a manifestation of the instability of identity and the assault on the boundaries of the self, however, is elided by Radcliffe when she has her heroine ironically invoke the “Holy Virgin,” the mother of Jesus. When the matriarch appears in female gothic texts, she frequently surfaces in just such a contradictory manner: a mother who is paradoxically a virgin, or the buried mother of *A Sicilian Romance*, or the mother as nun living safely in a convent, later, in *The Italian*. Good mothers cannot be actively sexual in the female gothic universe; only bad mothers (like the stepmother in *A Sicilian Romance* or the Marchesa in *The Italian*) exude sexuality and they suffer horrible deaths as a result of such unnatural desires. But shame and guilt also are clearly indicated in all of these scenarios of confused female identity. As Sandra Lee Bartky has pointed out, “a pedagogy of shame” suffuses patriarchal culture so that young girls are tutored in the dangers and corruption inherent in their own bodies. Not directly connected to specific actions, the experience of shame and guilt in relation to their bodies and sexuality stems from the female socialization process in which girls are taught “to internalize the gaze of a ‘hostile witness’ to our bodily being” (225).

With this textual background in mind, let me segue briefly here into Freudian dream and phantasy theory and speculate that the

dreams in this novel can be read as hysterical phantasy-formations in the sense that Freud defined hysteria: first, the hysteric suffers from a psychic trauma whose origin she does not know or has repressed, yet which has remained as a memory trace in her psyche. Freud calls these memories “pathogenic,” and, hysterical patients, he notes, suffer from incompletely abreacted physical traumas; they “suffer from reminiscences . . . they can not get free of the past, and for its sake they neglect what is real and immediate” (9: 160). More recently, Leigh Gilmore has expanded on this notion, stating that “trauma is never exclusively personal; it always exists within complicated histories that combine harm and pleasure. . . . Remembering trauma entails contextualizing it within history” (31). Similarly, Adeline suffers not from her own memories of past trauma, but from her father’s unresolved legacy of betrayal and murder. She, in a sense, stands in the stead of her dead father and relives his trauma in order to release him and herself from the ghostly presence he has assumed in her fractured psyche. In other words, the patriarchy as a corrupt system of barter and exchange is the very nightmare from which the female gothic heroine seeks to escape.

Second, the gap in conscious knowledge between the trauma and the partial memory of it causes what Freud calls “hysterical conversion,” that is, the somatization of conflictual unconscious representations. According to Freud, “hysterical symptoms are nothing other than unconscious phantasies brought into view through ‘conversion’” (qtd. in Caruth, 4). All of which is another way of saying that the body is compelled to act out its psychological overload either through excitation (tears, fits, or hallucinations) or through inhibition (melancholy, paralysis, catatonic senselessness). The gap, then, between knowledge about the trauma and the ability to process it consciously constitutes the very origin of hysteria (cf. Laplanche and Pontalis). And we can conclude that in some way the four dreams that are related in this text embody the conflation of that very gap between the trauma committed on the father’s body (and the consciousness or processing of the memory on the daughter’s substituted psyche) and its representation, the female gothic text.

But we can also read Adeline as a melancholic with Julia Kristeva’s work *Black Sun* in mind. For Kristeva, the melancholic mourns not a lost object but the failure to find an acceptable object for her sadness because she has not been able to separate successfully from the mother. The psychic loss cannot be appropriately symbolized because it has never actually taken place. The melancholic, however, has one positive response to this psychic impasse; she possesses the capacity to turn the loss into a gain, as it were, through language or art in which

absence and presence interact so that the control of signs in the pursuit of an ideal form substitutes for melancholic lament (33). Art and language heal melancholia through their endless capacity to put signifiers into interplay in a sort of *fort-da* game. This reeling back of the body of the wounded mother, read as the displaced matriarchy, and controlling the loss through telling the tale—modified and slightly revised, over and over again—constitute the female gothic narrative tradition (if not most of the subjects of women's writings).

Finally, I want to consider Freud's theory of phantasy and daydream formation. In his *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud claims that a dream is not a phantasmagoria but a text to be deciphered, and further he claims that it is in the very nature of sexuality to have a traumatic effect on the ego; therefore, he justifies the connection between sexuality, trauma, and defense. In both phantasies and dreams her majesty the ego dominates and determines all actions and consequences. As Freud observes, "A happy person never phantasizes, only an unsatisfied one," while he further claims that phantasies are articulations of a lack, a loss of the psychic plenitude we experienced in childhood. Most phantasies center on scenarios of self-aggrandizement and are structured around a narrative in which the ego regains a protective house, loving parents, and autoerotic objects suitable for the dreamer's affectionate feelings. Freud was to resort to an explanation that he called "primal phantasies of phylogenetic endowment" because here the individual touches not any personal experience but traces of a racial or primeval experience (actually similar to Jung's notion of the collective unconscious). For Freud the three primal phantasies that recur in all individuals are what he called the narrative of the seduction of three children, the inflaming of sexual excitement by observing parental intercourse, and the threat of castration or rather castration itself. Freud claims that these phantasies—the primal phantasies of heritage, seduction, and castration—"were once real occurrences in the primeval times of the human family, and children in their phantasies are simply filling in the gaps in individual truth with prehistoric truth" (qtd. in Laplanche and Portalis, 26). In Radcliffe's novel the heroine actually revisits all of these primal phantasies: seduction (at least an attempt by the odious uncle), sexual difference (the anxiety that Adeline experiences when her beauty elicits jealousy from women or lust from men), castration (the courtroom trial at which the uncle is exposed and condemned), and the attempt to recreate a family of origins (the recovery of the dead father's body). The discovery of her father's dead body is also on some level an attempt to reconstruct her own birth, an extremely morbid replay of the primal scene. The author's persistent recourse

to phantasy-formations alerts us to the residual presence of trauma in the text. As the research on trauma makes clear, there is no final resolution or successful rationalization and incorporation of trauma. Its effects linger like scars on a body, like markings on a blank page.

If we apply these insights to Adeline's dream scenario, we can recognize that she is fingering an archaic trauma, a need to solve the riddle of her own existence, to explore the issue of origins by asking questions like, Who am I in relation to my heritage? What is the origin of my body's anatomy? What causes my drives, my desires, my phantasies? (cf. Bronfen, *Hysteria*). The female gothic novel tradition would appear to be constructed over the bodies of the bloody father and the absent mother, but only because the mediating consciousness is that of the alternately melancholic and hysterical daughter. In articulating her phantasies, the female gothic heroine dreams textuality and textualizes her dreams. In doing so she reshapes her personal and historical trauma into a triumphant literary saga that asserts the woman's fictitious power to seize and control her origins or, rather, her phantasies of her origins.

III

But if Ann Radcliffe raised the female gothic to new heights of popularity and bourgeois respectability, Mary Shelley enshrined the genre through the publication of *Frankenstein* (1819), a novel so famous that people who have not read it think that they know it very well. *Frankenstein* inaugurated Shelley's writing career, and the story of its composition is itself a brilliant example of how the creative process is a manifestation of trauma's intersection with phantasy. As that novel has been exhaustively analyzed, by me among hundreds of others, I turn instead to a work by Shelley that actually reveals the traumatic residue and fantastic resolution of her life almost as clearly. Written two years after *Frankenstein* and not published until 1959, *Mathilda* is one of those lost fictions that surface more than a century later and suggest new possibilities and openings for understanding a writer's career. A short novel about a father's incestuous love for his daughter, his suicide, and the daughter's decline into melancholia and early death, *Mathilda* was written out of intense ambivalence toward both Godwin and Percy by a young woman who had seen both her father and her husband disappoint her, and three of her own young children die by the time she was twenty-two. Like her mother's thinly veiled autobiographies, *Mary* and *Maria*, Shelley's *Mathilda* reads all too much like her own phantasy rewrite of her life: the dead but perfect

mother, the absent but all-loving father willing to kill himself rather than hurt his beloved daughter, the bright but grieving daughter pursued by the handsome, rich, and famous young poet. Mathilda wills her own early death, but before that event occurs in the final pages of the novella, she depicts for her idealized audience of one (the poet Woodville) her life and the history of her emotions. The young idealized heroine has had very little external life, very few events outside the claustrophobic confines of the idyllic bourgeois family. The only adventure of Mathilda's life is the discovery and brief recovery of her father, and that recovery, unfortunately, kills them both.

Mathilda can be read on several levels as a working out of Shelley's own fantasy of the family romance turned nightmare. The worm at the core of Shelley's version, however, consists of her own displaced and elided incestuous desires, concealed from her consciousness by the use of the characters in *Mathilda* as screen-memories, fictively blocking her from viewing her own parents as objects of desire. Her favorite childhood sport is to "form affections and intimacies with the aerial creations of my own brain" and to "cling to the memory of my parents; my mother I should never see, she was dead: but the idea of my unhappy, wandering father was the idol of my imagination." Gazing longingly at the miniature of her father, Mathilda amuses herself with the fantasy that "disguised like a boy I would seek my father through the world. My imagination hung upon the scene of recognition; his miniature, which I should continually wear exposed on my breast, would be the means and I imagined the moment to my mind a thousand and a thousand times" (159).

Mathilda imagines herself searching for her father disguised as a boy, and we could say that such is the case because only boys have the freedom to travel, but we should also recognize here the desire of a girl to change her sex so that she will be more acceptable to the father. The use of the miniature as a talismanic identificatory tag suggests a rewriting of *The Italian* in interesting and ironic ways that reverberate throughout this text, for Ellena's miniature garnered her only a false father, producing yet another sadistic spin on the dystopian family romance. When Mathilda imagines her reunion with her father, it occurs sometimes in a desert, sometimes in a populous city, sometimes at a ball, sometimes on a vessel. He always speaks first and always his words are exactly the same: "My daughter, I love thee!" (159). The location—sometimes empty, sometimes crowded—suggests that the core of the incestuous phantasy for the child concerns numbers; that is, when she imagines the reunion, she refigures it as a denial of the reality of encroaching others in what is for her essentially an idealized

and exclusively dyadic relationship. For Mathilda, any competition for the father is fearful and needs to be eliminated. The father is allowed to reappear only when Mathilda is sixteen and at the height of her youthful beauty. With her mother safely dead and no siblings as rivals, Mathilda does not need to brook any competition. When her father magically appears in a forest to claim her, she is clad in a symbolically virginal white frock with a fetching tartan accent. *Mathilda* reads at this and other points as an embarrassing personal seduction fantasy. We have here Shelley's attempt to rewrite her life as if her father had not remarried and had a favorite child named William.

After her father's sudden return when she is sixteen, Mathilda puts her education to good use and immediately begins resorting to literary displacements in order to explain how she feels in relation to her father. These analogies are not particularly promising, for, very quickly, Mathilda compares herself to Oedipus, Psyche, and the biblical David. The transformation in associations and mythic archetypes suggests that Mathilda sees herself alternately as male and female, sometimes victimizer and sometimes victim of forces beyond her control. All of these mythic characters, however, have two traits in common: they were all wounded and traumatized repeatedly and yet all used their special talents to do battle against a potent and threatening familial figure or figures. We can recall Freud's query about the very core of surviving a deep psychic wound: is trauma to be understood as the direct and immediate brush with death, or, is trauma the experience of surviving that near-fatal disaster and yet to be forced to relive it repeatedly in dreams and painful memories? As Cathy Caruth has noted, "In the oscillation between the crisis of death and the crisis of life," we get "a kind of double-telling," a narrative that exists "between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (7). In Mathilda's case she conceals the initial wound—the mother's death and her own guilty survival—only to have that original lack, the primordial trauma reactivated when her father loves and then deserts her.

Styling herself as a heroine of melodrama, Mathilda cannot see herself except through the lenses of literary conventions or what we would recognize as phantasy formations. Sometimes she is a Greek mythological figure, sometimes a biblical hero, sometimes a Renaissance ideal, but finally she is never simply herself. In fact, one is tempted to say that she has not developed a sense of self, a sense of separation from others that would allow her to approach her father as an equal. She can only be his inferior and his part-object, a cathectic reminder of his earlier passion for his dead wife. She exists, in other

words, as the living embodiment of *his* wound, his loss of his wife. Because we read the text completely from Mathilda's point of view, it is easy to overlook the fact that the father is as wounded, if not more so, than his daughter. The narrative relates a doubled trauma, as if father and daughter were confronting each other in a dream and simultaneously asking, "Father/Daughter, don't you see that I am burning?" When Mathilda finally forces the "truth" out of her father, she is really confronting less the horror of incest than the fact that she has never been real to him. He sees her as the living embodiment of an earlier and more fulfilling relationship. He does not see her, but then he never did. He has simply been too wounded, too caught in his own saga of loss to see her as anything other than the living residue of his dead wife.

The theories of Nicolas Abraham are relevant here, particularly his notion of the "phantom," which he labels an "invention of the living" designed to objectify "the gap that the concealment of some part of a loved one's life produced in us. The phantom is, therefore, also a metapsychological fact. Consequently, what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others" (289). Mathilda, therefore, would appear to be pursued by the phantom of her mother, but in actuality she is haunted by the gap in her very living father's consciousness, his secret sexual dislocations. The case studies of Abraham have identified this syndrome, and his description bears an uncanny resemblance to the metapsychological dynamics of Mathilda and her father:

Because the phantom is not related to the loss of a loved one, it cannot be considered the effect of unsuccessful mourning, as is the case of melancholics or of all those who carry a tomb within themselves. It is the children's or descendants' lot to objectify these buried tombs through diverse species of ghosts. What comes back to haunt are the tombs of others. The phantoms of folklore merely objectify a metaphor active within the unconscious: the burial of an unspeakable fact *within the loved one*.

(289;)

But what, exactly, is the "unspeakable fact" within the father? The text informs us that it is incestuous and perverse love of father for daughter, but I would suggest that hate is the actual subject of this novella. When Mathilda tries to uncover her father's secret, she asks him: "Am I the cause of your grief?" (171), and he blurts out, "Yes, you are the sole, the agonizing cause of all I suffer, of all I must suffer until I die. Now, beware! Be silent! Do not urge me to your

destruction. . . . Beware!” (172). The syntax here is revealing, for it suggests a blaming of the victim that pervades the consciousness of most female gothic works. Mathilda *causes* her own destruction, the father suggests, by being desirable.

When confronted with the truth of his ambivalence, the father initially concedes the truth, which we are meant to take as untruth: “Yes, yes, I hate you! You are my bane, my poison, my disgust! Oh! No! . . . You are none of all these; you are my light, my only one, my life.—My daughter, I love you!” (173). The text has moved inexorably to this moment of climax, this confession of unnatural and incestuous passion. But the confession of love follows within a few breaths from an outburst of hatred. Mathilda’s immediate response is to sink to the ground, “covering my face and almost dead with excess of sickness and fear: a cold perspiration covered my forehead and I shivered in every limb” (173). The nausea that attacks her here is repeated at the end of the text, as she waits to die from a self-induced fever. But the illness from which she truly suffers and has suffered throughout the novella, however, is actually hatred toward her father and guilt for that hatred. His early desertion and long absence are never forgiven. His eccentricity, his jealousy of the vague suitor, his “strangeness”—all of these are repeated or elided so consistently that we can only conclude that Mathilda hates her father and longs to escape with an idealized and phantom mother.

But recall Abraham’s theory of the phantom yet once more. Children are haunted by the unresolved and secret sexual and psychic history of their parents in such a way that the children themselves come to embody the tombs that are enclosed within the psyches of their parents:

The phantom is a formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious—for good reason. It passes—in a way yet to be determined—from the parent’s unconscious into the child’s. . . . *The phantom which returns to haunt bears witness to the existence of the dead buried within the other.* A surprising fact gradually emerges: the work of the phantom coincides in every respect with Freud’s description of the death instinct. . . . The phantom is sustained by secreted words, invisible gnomes whose aim is to wreak havoc, from within the unconscious, in the coherence of logical progression. Finally, it gives rise to endless repetition and, more often than not, eludes rationalization.

(291)

If anyone is in the grip of the death instinct, it would appear to be Mathilda, who ends up recapitulating her father’s drive toward

self-extinction. And note the repetition-compulsion evidenced in the continual use of literary allusions to distance herself from the pain of actual life. Does either Mathilda or her father understand the psychic abyss into which they have fallen? It would seem that neither is able to rationalize the dilemma and so both continue to sink. But while protesting to love her father still with a pure heart, Mathilda is suddenly placed in a most gothic situation that very night. Much past midnight she hears her father's footsteps approach her bedroom, pause at her door, and then, after a few moments, retreat. This gothic leitmotif, the heroine besieged in her own bedroom on a dark and stormy night by a potential rapist, precipitates the most anxious emotions in Mathilda:

That he should be restless I understood; that he should wander as an unlaid ghost and find no quiet from the burning hell that consumed his heart. But why approach my chamber? Was not that sacred? I felt almost ready to faint while he had stood there, but I had not betrayed my wakefulness by the slightest motion, although I had heard my own heart beat with violent fear.

(175)

This nocturnal visit causes Mathilda to have a particularly unpleasant dream or rather nightmare about her father. Like most dreams in gothic texts, this one is an overdetermined warning and foreshadowing of what lies in the future for the heroine. It is also, like the dreams of Adeline in *The Romance of the Forest*, a repetitious reenactment of trauma. Freud emphasizes that there is a complicated relation between trauma and survival precisely because of the indirect nature of psychic woundings. What causes trauma, according to Freud, is a sudden shock that actually acts very much like a bodily, physical threat but is instead a rupture in the psyche's experience of time: "We may, I think, tentatively venture to regard the common traumatic neurosis as a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli. . . . And we still attribute importance to the element of fright. It is caused by lack of any preparedness for anxiety" (*SE*, 18: 31). Shortly after this passage, Freud points out that it is in dreams that we attempt to compensate for having directly missed the traumatic event. As Caruth points out,

The return of the traumatic experience in the dream is not the signal of the direct experience but, rather, of the attempt to overcome the fact that it was *not* direct, to attempt to master what was never fully grasped in the first place. Not having truly known the threat of death

in the past, the survivor is forced, continually, to confront it over and over again. For consciousness, then, the act of survival, as the experience of trauma, is the repeated confrontation with the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one's own life.

(62;)

In her ominously foreshadowing dream, Mathilda finds her father "deadly pale, and clothed in flowing garments of white. Suddenly he started up and fled from me." The chase ensues, with Mathilda vaguely aware that her father means to kill himself unless she can rescue him first. Just as she reaches him and catches a part of his robe, he leaps to his death off a cliff. Recall that Mathilda first met her father in a wood clothed in a flowing white garment, and notice now that the power-dynamic between them has shifted. Now it is the father who is dressed in white, less a virgin than a sacrificial victim. Now it is in the daughter's hands to give life and happiness, not the father's. The apprehension and resentment that the child feels at her powerlessness to win and keep the father's affections have turned into the opposite emotion. Now it is the child who can doom the father with her rejection of him. There is guilt and sorrow in the dream, but ultimately there is also anger and revenge: a wish-fulfillment that appears to say, "Daddy, don't you see that you are dying." The wages of the father's earlier desertion of the child are death now by that child's very hands.

The dream stands clearly as a wish-fulfillment, a castration phantasy, and the very next day the dream will be enacted with the expected fatal consequences. When Mathilda awakes the next morning, she learns that her father has fled the estate, leaving behind a maudlin and self-justifying letter. After writing his letter, Mathilda's father promptly leaves and dutifully walks off the very cliff Mathilda had foreseen in her dream. His death-march to the sea is punctuated by a lightning flash that rends an oak, a bell that sounds like a death knell, all of the very gothic props that had occurred in Matilda's dream of the night before. Following her father just too late to save him, she finally locates his dead body in a cottage near the sea: "The bed within instantly caught my eyes, something stiff and straight lay on it, covered by a sheet; the cottagers looked aghast" (184). The father has become that which he spent his life fleeing from: an object on a bed, stiff, straight, the subject of shock and disgust for innocent onlookers. In short, the father has become a phallic spectacle. Mathilda can only collapse on the side of the bed, having escaped the bed, having escaped the fate of her mother. A fear and loathing of the

body is evidenced here, both in the father and in Mathilda. The bed of life is also the bed of death, and it is a lucky child who is born and not consumed by her parents in the process of life.

And so I would claim that the need to write arises out of the gap between the experience of a trauma and our ability to work through and out of it. By writing a literary text, we transform the trauma, but we never process it to the point that the trauma can or ever will disappear. The residue of trauma as the origin of a literary work persists in repeated imagery patterns that we begin to recognize as excessive, obsessive, delusional, hyperbolic, indeed, hysterical. Julia Kristeva, in fact, has accused most women's novels of exhibiting "purposely perverse hysteria," while Mary Jacobus talks about "hysterical texts" such as Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* as almost paradigmatic expressions of women's creativity (qtd. in Hoeveler, 13). Mathilda and Adeline, like their creators, appear to swing between excessive emotional overload and catatonic melancholia. The narrative oscillations in both texts can be explained largely through the struggle to act out the trauma and, at the same time, to futilely attempt to understand or rationalize the memories of the pain.

The contemporary critic Stephen Weismann has coined the term "the Loss-Restitution Hypothesis of Creativity" to explain this phenomenon. According to Weismann, the creative person is "a loss-sensitive, separation-prone individual, both by temperament and as a result of early trauma(s)." In order to compensate for these losses, the artist develops whatever verbal, musical, or visual abilities she has as a "compensatory defense against loss and separation." As this individual develops into adulthood, she uses these talents as learned coping mechanisms and as a mode of identity formation. For Weismann, therefore, "art is a disguised form of nostalgically autobiographical remembering whose commemorative powers seek to defy nature's inevitable forces of death, decay, and loss." By creating a permanent object, the artist "defends against depression while the creative product itself represents a symbolic denial of loss." But as Weismann notes, no amount of creativity can ever fill the void—the lack—that is at the core of the wounded psyche (191–93). Hence the artist creates the way an addict seeks out the drug of choice. In a strikingly similar vein and more recently, Suzette Henke has presented a convincing case for what she calls the healing power of narrative or "scriptotherapy," another version of transforming traumas into the written fantasies that I have examined here.

This chapter has posed a number of questions: Can creativity be understood simply as personal, or, is it always implicated in larger

cultural, social, historical factors? Is creativity a manifestation of fantasy as a coping mechanism, a means by which we reshape trauma in order to master the wounds inflicted on us by our own past histories? Or, is creativity a quality that transcends the individual psyche and its scars, in fact, the very quality that allows us to reimagine ourselves in fantasized triumphant postures? The Hispanic feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa has argued that one of the byproducts of being a woman in a patriarchy is social and cultural alienation, and that one of the consequences of being “pushed out of the tribe” is the development of a heightened artistic sense or the drive to create cosmos out of chaos. Anzaldúa calls this affective feature *la facultad* and describes it as a sort of extrasensory perception that develops in those who have been wounded by, traumatized, or rejected by their cultures: “Living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create” (73). The particular texts examined in this chapter—but any texts could be chosen if our hypothesis is correct—are suffused with predictable psychic strategies so that the reader can only participate as a sort of voyeur as very private dilemmas are made public. But then I would claim that literature is made of just such material, and although it is uncomfortable perhaps to recognize the wound as well as the fantastic shapes it assumes to conceal itself, ultimately we have no choice but to read them.

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CHAPTER 4



ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING AND RHETORICAL LOCATION: MODERN RHETORS TRANSGRESSING CULTURE AND TRANSFORMING GENRE

Donna Decker Schuster

How women writers view their creativity and the question of a woman's tradition continue to be central feminist concerns within literary studies. The difficulty of essentialist claims fuels these concerns. These issues beg the question: How does the project of recovering a more accurate picture of literary tradition, from which women were largely excluded, influence the way we read and evaluate women's creativity? If we are calling the field "feminist studies—feminism—women's studies," how do we avoid making essentialist claims in our readings of texts that by and large exclude women's writing from the literary historical tradition? Recently, Lois Cucullu reminded us that the question "Where's the woman Shakespeare?" was designed to "undermine women's political competence by tying it to artistic success" (158). Interestingly, this question also prompted Virginia Woolf's famous creation. Literary roads lead to and from Woolf's Judith Shakespeare—the nexus of feminist consciousness and modernist literature.

I intend to argue that Elizabeth Barrett Browning, like Woolf, helped to carve the road toward literary modernism. A number of Barrett Browning's poems reveal that critics' political and cultural

expectations of her as a woman poet denigrate the roles of her women speakers as well as some of her texts. The critical charges leveled at her poems are that they read as unseemly melodrama, hysterical, typical, say, of a woman's sentimental elegy but inferior in formal, literary terms. The three poems discussed in this chapter, "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," "Mother and Poet," and "Curse for a Nation" examine the way the speaker and the poet proper engage cultural, literary, and gendered discourse communities. But these speakers cannot effectively grieve or be consoled as their elegiac foremothers and the literary patriarchy expected because competing cultural ideologies marginalized women, their bodies, and their work. The speakers in these three poems, and the critical controversy and reception surrounding them, reveal a poet whose creativity, and perhaps some of her most innovative poetics, arose out of the rhetorical locations from which the Victorian "poetess" was barred, and from which the modern elegiac rhetors—the runaway slave, the mother, the poet, the angel—were dismissed, condemned, and raped, and their progeny sacrificed.

Barrett Browning explored rhetorical locations from which poetic and cultural creativity emerged as her women speakers resisted the conventions imposed upon them. Moreover, the poet's resistance to literary codes reveals her own creativity as her poems enter into the patriarchal logic of elegy and help to move the genre into its modernist form. An important theoretical focus for understanding the value of these poems as they point toward a modernist poetic is the nature of the speakers' utterances; Barrett Browning constructs her rhetors in order to transgress the cultural ideologies that put them, as speakers, in untenable roles. In their recent collection, *Rhetorical Women*, Hildy Miller and Lillian Bridwell-Bowles identify the location of the "rhetorical act" in a space that "occurs not through the rhetor's agency alone but also through the point in language and the place in the cultural context that the utterance occurs" (11). It is through an analysis of the rhetorical acts of Barrett Browning's women speakers that we can see the poet helping the runaway slave, for example, *see* and struggle with her lack of agency. Through these self-conscious reflections, these speakers transgress their cultural roles and create agency, albeit in complex and disturbing ways.

In this chapter, I will examine the location of culture, elegiac language, and the way that speakers and the poet act as rhetors demonstrating Barrett Browning's innovations of the elegy from its traditional form to its modernist manifestation. In the process, I will discuss the ways in which the culture, critical reception, and

literary traditions surrounding these poems emphasize the patriarchal values within the systems that marginalize both the poet and the speaker. Miller and Bridwell-Bowles provide us with a kind of map for identifying these rhetorical locations. They write, “[W]hereas postmodernists tend to credit language and culture for that shaping, modernists tend to credit the rhetor. For us, however, the rhetorical shaping and meaning making is interactive, a synergy of these three components—rhetor, language, and culture—as they manifest in a particular location” (11). These women speakers emphasize their bodily roles as woman slave, mother, and woman poet, as inscribed by culture through language and its conventions.

For example, Barrett Browning’s poem “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” speaks to the location where literary, rhetorical, and feminist histories converge. The convergence of these histories, as in Woolf’s *Judith Shakespeare*, reveals two feminist *rhetors*—the speaker and the poet—both of whom create their agency out of rhetorical locations. Out of the cultural tradition of slavery, the poet creates a rhetor who speaks about her “performance” as a woman and a female slave. Out of the genre of elegy, she speaks of the self-consciously inadequate “performance” of the woman poet to console the runaway slave through the devices of the elegy. The poem itself becomes a site of contest and critique of the literary, social, and domestic ideologies in which the runaway slave’s status prevents her participation in the very cultural acts expected of women. These domestic, social, and literary ideologies marginalized women from the larger cultural and literary traditions. It is an impossible situation: the slave cannot ever fully perform as a woman, and the poet can never effectively redeem and console the runaway slave through the form of the elegy. In writing this poem, however, the poet acts as the modernist rhetor who transgresses the boundaries of literary tradition and gains agency through these impossible “performances.” The poet’s transformation of genre engages the critical cultural and literary circumstances that marginalize women on several levels.

TRANSGRESSING CULTURE AS RHETORICAL LOCATION

Originally written for an American audience and published in the abolitionist magazine *The Liberty Bell* in 1848, “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” is an elegy (cf. Stauffer). The poet was keenly aware of her audience’s potential response to the content of this poem and her letters reveal this awareness: “I am just sending off an anti-slavery poem for America, too ferocious, perhaps, for the

Americans to publish: but they asked for a poem and shall have it" (Barrett Browning, "Letters," 315). In the poem, the runaway slave goes to Pilgrim's Point to call the pilgrim souls back to mourn the loss of the land of liberty because so many, including the speaker, suffer in slavery; the speaker is barred from living and loving freely. Pilgrim's Point is a rhetorical location of hypocrisy. But the "death" of the land of liberty is also the consequence of the runaway slave having lost her lover and realizing that this loss comes about merely because he is black; she then realizes that her position as a slave, despite having taken a lover, is also caused merely because she is black. Nevertheless, she is conscious that she has a dynamic identity and she asserts her agency before her lover is killed, singing his name and seeking his blood mark in the sand. While some critics believe that this poem should be situated in the sentimental, romantic, or melodramatic genres because of a lack of female agency (Parry, 114; Brophy, 274), I disagree. The poem does contain some Victorian poetic characteristics, but several elements of the poem, its form and function, are distinctly modern. The speaker possesses a level of self-consciousness that problematizes readings that see only sentimental conventions here.

Some critics oversimplify the poem as melodramatic; however, Ann Parry defends Barrett Browning's poem, especially against criticism that positions it as sentimental. She notes the symbolic and ironic function of the ballad form within the context of the "melodramatic" or "sentimental" tradition that other critics have claimed for it. Parry also sees the form of the poem as functioning both at the individual and at the symbolic level; that is, she asserts that the poem works to show the audience "effects [of slavery] rather than their causes" as well as the runaway slave's self-conscious deliberations (Parry, 21). Parry's aim in grappling with the effects of slavery is to forestall rationalizing the causes of the runaway slave's rape and the murder of her lover by slave owners. This narrative complexity demonstrates that Barrett Browning moved beyond the melodramatic and sentimental position often accorded to her.

This complex view of the poem as I see it reflects the rhetorical location where Victorian domestic ideology meets with the critical expectations of a woman elegist. In "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," Barrett Browning subverts the tradition of nineteenth-century women's elegies that were thought to be subordinate and inferior to the male tradition by refusing to treat the runaway slave and her child with typical, so-called sentimental, Victorian women's conventions (Ramazani, 21–22). Ramazani's claim of a woman's

elegiac tradition is clearly debatable and elegiac poetry is fraught with both literary and gendered codes, which complicate this claim. British women poets had been writing elegies for their children and families for three hundred years before the nineteenth century; infant mortality played an important role in the frequency and form of these elegies. The elegy for the child during this time was “one of the most frequently practiced [modes], and it exemplifies the strong grip of literary and religious codes on women’s elegies, rigidly curbing the expression of anger and grief” (Ramazani, 296). Barrett Browning goes against the grain of this practice by refusing to “curb the expression of anger and grief” the runaway slave expresses. Instead, the runaway slave curses the land, Pilgrim’s Point, which represents the location of “freedom,” revealing ideological hypocrisy. She identifies the way in which other women were complicit in her enslavement and wishes for their husbands,

Each, for his own wife’s joy and gift,
A little corpse as safely at rest
As mine in the mangoes!”
(ll. 213–15).

The runaway slave is denied even the restrictive domestic conventions as she is subject to the perverse conventions of the slave woman without a right to her own body or her own children. Yet, by suggesting that her own child is a corpse at rest, she strangely adheres to motherly obligations.

In addition, the poet’s presentation of the Runaway Slave does not adhere to the common domestic elegiac characteristics that Ramazani identifies in Felicia Hemans’s elegies; the speaker does not celebrate the child’s never having to suffer in the world (296). Despite the fact that at the start of her narrative about the baby the runaway slave says, “. . . all ended for the best” (l. 112), her infanticide can hardly be viewed in a positive light. Instead, the poem stresses the child’s suffering. For example, the runaway slave’s child “moaned and beat with his head and feet,” and “moaned and struggled . . . he wanted the master-right!” (ll. 127; 124). This evidence supports the claim that the speaker does not curb her expression of anger and grief. Rather than having her child die without sin as is common in women’s elegies (Ramazani, 298), the runaway slave’s child appears complicit in slavery because of his whiteness, his desire for the “master right,” because he has, “[t]he master’s look, that used to fall / On my soul like his lash . . . or worse!” (ll. 144–45). Interestingly, this is not the

only elegy Barrett Browning writes that subverts the women's elegiac tradition and that partly blames women's status on the hypocrisy of nationalism.

The runaway slave is aware that the cultural category imposed upon her conflicts with her taking a lover because she tells us that the two had "no claim to love and bliss" (l. 100). She refuses, however, to align herself within this category. This transgression is, as Judith Butler says, one that both produces pleasure for her as she sings of her love and "brings with it ostracism, punishment and violence" (1522). The speaker gains agency and pleasure through her transgression. The runaway slave recalls her joy at finding love, then contrasts this remembrance with her cries to God:

Yes, two, O God, who cried to Thee,
Though nothing didst Thou say!
Coldly Thou sat'st behind the sun
(ll. 95-97)

God does not protect them; the slave owners kill her slave lover. The poem emphasizes the textual codes that the runaway slave adopts for celebrating and mourning. She recalls the way they communicated, by singing,

his name instead of a song
Over and over I sang his name,
Upward and downward I drew it along
My various notes,—the same, the same!
(ll. 77-79)

Here her singing is a subversive textual cue; later the same song is a lament for her exacerbated, multiple losses. Elegiac naming and repetition work together to produce a new version of her performance through textual cues. These textual cues reflect her dynamic identity, the songs of elegy, and her own analysis of the categories imposed upon her.

She sings her lover's name to celebrate their love, and when he is taken from her she crawls,

to touch
His blood's mark in the dust . . . not much,
Ye pilgrim-souls, though plain as *this!*
(ll. 104-5)

Thus, the runaway slave recognizes that his blood mark represents him (his essence, his body), and she compares it to the story that she tells, that the blood mark in the dust is as plain as her story: the text of the poem, her words, her linguistic performance of mourning. The textual and language cues are evidence of her transgression and the violent punishments she suffers as a result. In addition, this self-conscious textual reference implies that “this!” is the poem and the performance of mourning itself; the poem is as much physical evidence as his blood mark in the dust.

The elegy for liberty arises from the loss of the runaway slave’s lover. By taking a lover, the speaker subverts the social category imposed upon her as slave. Butler writes that socially imposed categories are “a compulsory performance in the sense that acting out of line with . . . norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions” (Butler, 1522). The runaway slave loses her lover to whom she had no right, according to slavery, to love and, in this way, transgresses the identity imposed upon her by her slave owners. She remembers her lover with characteristically elegiac nostalgia, recalling that their

spirits grew
As free as if unsold, unbought;
Oh, strong enough, since we were two,
To conquer the world, we thought.”
(ll. 64–67)

However, she is also aware that this is an assertion of her agency. She questions, Could “a slave look so at another slave?” and recognizes that they “had no claim to love and bliss” (l. 93) according to the social institutions imposed upon them. Her ability to question this situation reveals that she is aware of her “transgression.” This self-consciousness focuses our attention on other textual cues as well as emphasizes the poem’s move toward a modernist elegiac.

Other critics of this poem miss the complexity of the runaway slave’s self-consciousness—that she is caught between two roles whose codes are mutually exclusive of each other. She can never fulfill both sets of conventions as mother and slave—and she knows it. Elizabeth Battles positions her critical work in contrast to Parry by evaluating the actions of Sethe, from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, as a touchstone character whose infanticide sets her children free of slavery. However, Battles treats the runaway slave’s “racial designation” as separate and subordinate to the persona’s motherhood. Biologically, the slave has

become a mother and yet her maternal performance is banned by law. Battles overlooks significant language cues that depict the persona's references to her own dynamic identity, her complex cultural position, and her suffering. Sarah Brophy claims that this poem creates a "melodramatic . . . excess . . . that circumscribes the speaker's subjectivity so that it corresponds to conventional notions of female happiness as dependent on success in the roles of wife and mother" (275). While it may be true that cultural expectations of female happiness are grounded in domestic and social ideologies of womanhood, the runaway slave's position is different from that of nonslave women because the free woman "[m]ay keep live babies on her knee, / and sing the song she likes the best" (ll. 215–17). The runaway slave is caught between the forced bodily function of birth and the lack of freedom to act in ways expected of mothers. It is an intellectually impossible situation that is not necessarily as melodramatic as it appears to be, for she is excluded from performing the cultural conventions placed upon her.

GENRE AND GENDER

In Barrett Browning's poem "Mother and Poet," the poet shows the ways in which gender reveals an internal cultural conflict as the speaker "adopts the voice of a bereaved mother for whom the birth of the Italian nation does nothing to redeem the death of her two sons in battle" (Ramazani, 297). In order for a traditional elegy to achieve consolation as in this case, the child's death must be redeemed somehow. Barrett Browning resists this convention, however, which implies two different conclusions. First, this resistance implies the speaker's opposition to the patriarchal order of nation building; nothing substitutes for living children, or for the relationship the mother has with her children. Second, resistance implies that when a mother loses her child in the name of nationalism consolation cannot be achieved. Both implications subvert the conventional notion that the elegy is a linguistic path toward consolation on an individual or a cultural level.

In "Mother and Poet" Barrett Browning also offers a discussion of the woman's body as it relates to the cultural, gendered, and genre conventions that raise some interesting insights about the rhetorical location of the mother and the way she views her body. Whereas Celeste Schenck sees the lack of redemption in the poem as ironized (the sons do not create new life under a "unified" nationalism), I see this irony as a more gendered reflection of the speaker's marginalization

from nationalism. In addition, some critics see Barrett Browning's texts about Italian nationalism as relating to her own British nationalism. For instance, John Lucas writes, "[The Brownings] were not unaware of [Italy's] history, nor of the part that the Iron Hand had played in it. But as *English* people in Florence, they were necessarily, self-consciously, enabled to redefine the possibilities of Englishness" (Lucas, 192). Barrett Browning did so by examining the gendered conventions of nationalism.

For example, in "Mother and Poet" she enacts a discussion of the gendered aspects of nationalism as they related to her role as a mother, as a creative woman, and as a poet. The poem becomes, then, a rhetorical location for the Barrett Browning to use her agency to discuss the body and how her speaker's motherhood is viewed by her culture. The following passage reflects a rhetorical use of the nation—nationalism as a metaphor for birthing:

Forgive me. Some women bear children in strength,
And bite back the cry of their pain in self-scorn;
But the birth-pangs of nations will wring us at length
Into wail such as this—and we sit on forlorn
When the man-child is born.

("Mother and Poet," ll. 91–95)

This conflict reflects an intersection of culture, gender, and genre. The mother will not be consoled for her loss, nor will she console the nation for the birth of the child to be sacrificed. She uses her own creativity, speaking from the margins of the body, gaining agency from her knowledge of birth, and through the speaker's refusal to adhere to traditional elegiac conventions, the poet's resistance becomes literary innovation. By exposing the cultural sacrifice of the mother's body to give birth to the son, the nation's disposal of the child in its quest for "unity" as one of the root causes of the speaker's ambivalence and violence, Barrett Browning not only subverts the women's elegies, she anticipates modern women elegists such as Plath, Sexton, and Rich as well as Yeats, Hardy, and Heaney, who also refuse to mourn in docile, submissive ways.

Not only do Barrett Browning's speakers explore the rhetorical locations of culture and nationalism at America's Pilgrim's Point and in the Italian fight for unification, the poet herself reveals that rhetorical location is central for critics as well. "Curse for a Nation" (1860), appearing in her volume *Poems Before Congress*, was almost universally condemned upon publication. The criticisms focused almost entirely

on Barrett Browning's gender: a reviewer in *Blackwood's* writes, "We love the fair sex too well, to desire that they should be withdrawn from their own sphere which is that of adorning the domestic circle . . . to figure in the public arena" (qtd. in Stone, 170). Of course, we see that Barrett Browning's literary marginalization in this case comes directly from crossing over from what is considered the appropriate "domestic sphere" into a political discourse community.

Indeed, Robert Browning attempted to answer the condemnations of his wife's foray into politics. And in 1966, David DeLaura reprinted Robert Browning's letter that claimed that his wife's poem was misread by critics and is actually about American slavery and not "Italian and European politics." The debate DeLaura raised continued into the 1990s as Sandra Donaldson takes it up in her article, "For Nothing was Simply One Thing," titled from Virginia Woolf's famous lines. The crux of the controversy is whether this poem cursed a hypocritical England for not entering the struggle to support Italian unification and therefore its nationalist efforts, or whether the poem is about the hypocrisy of American slavery as America is "freedom's newest acolyte." The thread that runs throughout this poem also runs through Barrett Browning's exploration of "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" and "Mother and Poet," namely, that these public, marginalized sites are rhetorical locations from which the woman poet creates and explores the cultural view and misuse of her body. The poet may expect to be hotly condemned by critics as a result. But the genre she uses to depict these misuses of women is one of mourning—the mode driven by patriarchal conventions with which the woman poet refuses to submissively align herself. Because of the conflict between genre and gender, the rhetorical site and controversy over this poem reflects a kind of literary modernism in which, as Lois Cucullu claims, "literary modernists have given a distinctive, if esoteric language that functions as an innovative form of emotional literacy" (170). Barrett Browning's speakers easily eschew the Victorian woman's "role" as elegist, consoling mother, and redemptive poet to develop this emotional literacy.

Returning, then, to "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," we can see the speaker's self-conscious focus on language as a way to represent herself through this emotional literacy. She uses this new rhetorical position on emotional literacy to meditate upon her lover, and later her baby, by singing names as songs, questioning the binaries of her "blackness" (the baby's "whiteness," the black mirthful creatures, and the white tricking angels). These examinations suggest

that Barrett Browning did ground the runaway slave's experience in self-conscious linguistic representation. The poet constructs a speaker aware of her supposed transgression from the cultural category imposed upon her, and she suffers tragically because of her transgression. The poem, then, is an utterance and a critique of the categories into which she is placed. The runaway slave questions the validity of these textual cues, "whiteness" and "blackness," and Barrett Browning—as rhetor—highlights the speaker's critique of these cultural markers within the elegiac tradition. The runaway slave is aware of the textual cues that help her transgress her position *as a slave* with a lover. Moreover, these textual cues ground her experience and reflect her forced compliance with cultural roles—out of these roles Barrett Browning shows the way language, culture, and rhetor serve as rhetorical locations for women's agency. The speaker is physically violated and forced into these experiences after she is raped and gives birth to a slave-master's child. This oppression creates a static vision of her identity against which she pushes, self-consciously identifying the markers and conventions that oppress her.

Not only do the self-conscious linguistic cues express the speaker's emotional literacy, they reflect a transformation of elegiac rituals. For example, whereas Christ's wounds redeem the sins of mankind, the runaway slave's cultural oppression and crucifixion "pay no debt" (l. 238). This emphasizes the literary impotence of the traditional elegy to console as well as the lack of redemption in the runaway slave's cultural circumstances. In a self-consciously literary move, it is through the language cues of elegiac questioning prior to her rape that Barrett Browning gives the runaway slave the agency to subvert her position as slave, however momentarily, and take a lover. By constructing a speaker who uses self-conscious references, Barrett Browning demonstrates the runaway slave's awareness of her own complex cultural situation—her impossible rhetorical location. Overlooked is the compound nature of her cultural position because it is the runaway slave who explains that she has infinite potential for different performances. Her ability to question her own performance, and acknowledge the conflict of the roles into which others have cast her, reflects a double-edged view of herself and others as subjects, not as the object that the slave owners regard her.

Moreover, the runaway slave's infanticide represents a horrific disruption of family values. "The circle of domestic affections" had been the proper locus for "women's" elegies of the nineteenth century (Ramazani, 294). The runaway slave may not have broken

completely from patriarchal values, but she distances herself from the “so-called ‘circle of domestic affections’” that characterizes many women’s elegies (Ramazani, 294). Rather than being the locus of the family, “The Runaway Slave” reverses the creation of life and blames the child for its mother’s pain and potential oppression. She casts the child out of the relationship in which she is at the center and, therefore, exercises her agency against the demands of the family and against the system of slavery. Consequently, these characteristics show that the poem subverts the domestic tradition common to women’s elegies.

Her performance of mourning shifts from a traditional elegy to a modern one that underscores Ramazani’s core contention that mourners in the modern elegy often turn their guilt inward. Guilt, he argues, “renew[s] rather than override[s] loss” (5). Therefore, the fact that the runaway slave grieves immediately after her lover is killed, but claims that she is not worthy of grieving, emphasizes the way in which—as a slave in mourning—she is cognizant of the significance of her emotional gesture and intellectual response. She knows, for example, that the physical violence against her disrupts her mourning process:

Wrong, followed by a deeper wrong!
 Mere grief’s too good for such as I:
 So the white men brought the shame ere long
 To strangle the sob of my agony.
 They would not leave me for my dull
 Wet eyes!—it was too merciful
 To let me weep pure tears and die.

(ll. 99–105)

In addition, this passage is consciously elegiac in the modern sense because of its ambivalence toward the self; the runaway slave hopes they will leave her alone to die, that grief is too good for her. The rhyme scheme that accents “I” and “die” bears out the emphasis on the death wish and the rupture in her mourning process. Finally, in this passage, the speaker indicates her ambivalence toward mourning as well as implies her death wish as a result of the emotional rupture followed by the physical assault; this ambivalence and the death wish are distinctly modern (6). After the loss of her lover, the runaway slave distrusts traditional notions of mourning. She rejects the possibility of consolation, given her tragic circumstances. The acknowledgment of these modern elements appears immediately on the heels

of the self-consciously linguistic, textual cues that compare her lover's blood to the elegy, or, "this!" the text itself. The death of her lover is a "[w]rong, followed by deeper wrong! / Mere grief's too good for such as I." She moves from a traditional kind of mourning to a melancholic mourning that Ramazani characterizes as "unresolved, violent, and ambivalent" (4). The melancholic mourner resists comfort and criticizes the self for the extraordinary pain of her loss just as the runaway slave claims that grief is too good for her. Furthermore, the extraordinary pressures brought about by her social position as a slave who transgresses the boundaries of her oppression result in more horrific circumstances. She cannot move toward consolation because, immediately after her lover's death, she is raped. This rape produces a child.

Through her own agency as a woman poet, Barrett Browning subverts some of the conventions of English elegies by having the runaway slave act ambivalently and violently (in addition to her act of infanticide) to answer oppression. "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" is not the only Barrett Browning elegy that pits the needs of the nation against the individual. This pattern also reflects the poet's transgression of literary boundaries. Therefore, by contrasting the individual and nation, and emphasizing the literary codes of behavior in elegy, the poet highlights the subject's utterance and the cultural conventions in which these operate as a site of contest and critique. In addition, by introducing modern elegiac elements, Barrett Browning depicts the runaway slave as "transvaluing" her grief; she sees her individual grief and loss in the larger context of a loss of liberty.

MODERN ELEGIST AS RHETOR

The speaker's ability to discern the subtle dynamism of identity relates to her performance of mourning because both operate simultaneously. The runaway slave is aware that she subverts the identity category imposed upon her; she dramatizes the pleasure and the suffering that results from taking a lover. The speaker's attention to textual and linguistic cues reflects a self-consciousness, and this double-edged sense arises out of seeing one's own utterance as the object of analysis and critique. Even Ramazani's contention that there existed a woman's elegiac tradition into which he places Barrett Browning, reflects a gendered marginalization of women poets from the elegiac tradition. Barrett Browning's shift of elegiac conventions achieves in the "domestic" elegy what Cucullu claims of other modernists, namely, it is with "paradigmatic displacement by expert

culture of the bourgeois household's authority to include its cultural envoy, the domestic novel [or in this case the domestic elegy] that literary modernists and their technical innovations ought also to be located" (169). The poet's elegiac innovations, her literary creativity, arise from her subversion of the domestic and gendered conventions placed upon her art.

To see this more clearly, we might return to Brophy's conclusion that "Barrett Browning tends to accent the importance of communicating a fixed 'vision' of justice rather than the investigation of the way that social oppression is grounded in linguistic representation" (285). While slave owners perpetuate this "fixed vision," the runaway slave, contrary to Brophy's assertion, reveals ambivalence toward her baby, and infanticide is hardly a vision of justice that is acceptable to anyone, including the persona who ends the poem, "In [her] broken heart's disdain!" (l. 252). She shifts the mourning process from a traditional to a modern performance of elegiac rituals and characteristics.

In terms of the literary critical context, the poem's modern qualities reveal a political literary move on the part of Barrett Browning—an attempt to use poetic creativity to reflect the impossibility of consolation within the form of elegy in the runaway slave's circumstances. As a performance of mourning, her ability as a poet to incorporate elements of the modern elegy subverts the so-called sentimental literary tradition in which she writes. Furthermore, because Barrett Browning situates her elegy in a premodernist tradition, she also subverts the English elegy. In this way, she carves out a new political space for herself. Barrett Browning's poem, as a modern elegy, investigates the way mourning was not an acceptable performance or role for the oppressed slave woman. Restricting creativity and agency by disallowing her mourning perpetuates the violence associated with the modern elegy and precludes the critical move toward consolation.

One critic implies that Barrett Browning's poem is reductive, that the construction of God as protector consoles the speaker. For example, Brophy writes that "for Barrett Browning, God's protective hand is always stretched out for all his children; if only slaves and masters alike were able to perceive this and to understand their relationship to the 'eternal' (if only they were all poets!) then slavery would necessarily be done away with" (278). The runaway slave, however, tells us that God does not protect her; Brophy imposes a consolation and resolution on the runaway slave's grief that does not exist in the poem. What Brophy suggests does not change what the runaway slave has done to her child; God's protective hand is certainly not protective of the runaway slave's baby. Furthermore, by withholding

consolation in the poem, Barrett Browning's speaker sustains a melancholic mourning that reflects a modernist sensibility. Although the mother and child may be reconciled, she is hardly consoled for his death. At the end of the poem she leaves the white men "curse-free / in [her] broken heart's disdain!" (l. 253). In so doing she refuses to curse her male auditors because in her heart she feels disdain, which indicates that cursing them is beneath her dignity. The persona, a woman, refuses consolation for herself and refuses to give the white men the satisfaction they may have gained with her blame. These modern elegiac moves are interesting because they indicate that the poem subverts the docile, submissive women's elegies characteristic of the nineteenth century. The death of the child as freedom from life may be characteristic of nineteenth century women's elegies, but infanticide is not (Ramazani, 331).

The effects Barrett Browning creates in this poem, while they do not shift radically from all aspects of the patriarchal hegemony typical of Victorian culture, demonstrate several premodern elegiac moves associated with melancholic and modern mourning. In this way, Barrett Browning subverts the English elegy. The speaker in "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" walks us through the different ways in which her complex cultural situation denies her access to traditional modes of consolation—in discussing the ineffectiveness of elegy, the speaker, and the poet, through her, assert their agency. Barrett Browning self-consciously highlights the textual cues associated with the runaway slave's social oppression, illustrating the speaker's awareness of these cues and making the subject's utterance the object of analysis. These textual cues function to perform ambivalent, violent, and ironic elegiac moves within the poem and, in this way, the poem anticipates modern women elegists such as Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Adrienne Rich. It is in this way that we can continue to explore the complex nature of Barrett Browning's poems and excavate the depth of their significance in cultural, literary, and gender arenas.

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CHAPTER 5



ELEGANCE AND MAKE-UP: NATURE, MODERNITY, AND THE FEMALE BODY IN THE SPANISH BEACH NARRATIVES OF THE 1920S; WENCESLAO FERNÁNDEZ FLÓREZ AND CARMEN DE BURGOS

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In the second half of the nineteenth century, industrial development and the fashion for sea bathing brought profound transformations to the European seacoasts. In coastal villages traditionally inhabited by fishermen alone, several concomitant processes marked the arrival of Modernity. While the consolidating steamboat enterprises and the developing fishing and fish-processing industries started making individual fishermen's business unproductive and obsolete, the privatization of the shores initiated a separation of the coastal population from the seaside. As soon as the local authorities began allowing the development of the coast in private interests, old fishermen's houses and fish markets had to recede, clearing space for sea-bathing pavilions, fenced beaches, and hotels. The growing popularity of the hygienic theories propagating the "sea cure" fueled the fad for sea bathing and maintained the demand for developing an infrastructure for beach tourism. By the end of the nineteenth century, in most European countries affordable and reliable train connection secured mass arrival of bathers from inland to the sea resort towns, and trams substituted

old carriages transporting the visitors from the train stations to the shore (cf. Walton, Gil de Arriba, Litvak, Urbain).

In the face of these radical transformations, it was the visible change of the seaside by the developing beach tourism that provided writers with images and narratives that could make Modernity representable. The writers' pens—and occasionally their modern typewriters—reflected astonishing beach machines and pavilions, newly built or refurbished houses and hotels, loud trams and steamers. Their stories became populated by picturesque beach visitors, traveling alone or with family, clad in white suits and dresses, and sometimes scantily covered by bathrobes and swimming suits. Narratives set on the beach, which started circulating in different parts of Europe in the second part of the nineteenth century, feature symptomatically repetitive objects and subjects, as if the writers' contemplation of the mass-produced signs of modern leisure culture required a standardized image-repertoire, full of the emblems of modern times. Whatever the plot or genre, the settings of these stories in one of the seaside resorts, with their trademark modern details, conveyed a message about modernization and its social consequences. I will call such stories "beach narratives" (cf. Richardson, Prince).

Since it is the function of the beach setting as an emblem of Modernity that interests me here, the term "narrative" will allow us to focus on the ongoing reflection about the modern transformations of nature and human society that authors working in different genres and belonging to different regions, literary traditions, and historical periods chose to set on touristy beaches. Specific studies show that beach narratives faithfully follow the itinerary of industrial development of beach areas themselves, from northern shores southbound, thus allowing for a typological study of the beach imagery and of the problematic that it conveys (cf. Nadel-Klein). On the pages of beach narratives, the transformation of wild seashores and fishermen's villages, privileged by the Romantics, into sea-bathing locations that modern writers inspected with curiosity, astonishment, and sometimes disgust, emerges as a visible result of hidden shifts in the relations of production, lifestyles, norms of behavior, and values that accompanied modern development in the big cities and in the rural periphery.

In this context, the beach presents itself as a highly encoded public space where tradition and modernity, nature and civilization, private property and no-man's possession are disputed and leave visible traces. The origin of the idea of sea bathing from the heart of the Enlightened model of the universe—the notion of contrast and

mutual permeability of nature and culture, elements and the human body and mind—suggests that Modernity projected itself on the beach from the outset. Sea bathing is archetypically linked to the idea of a cure coming from a combination of sea, land, and a civilizing human activity regulating their use. In eighteenth-century medical practice, sea baths were believed to treat various corporeal and mental distortions, since the cold and salty seawater was invested with the power to purge ill spirits and infections via external and internal use (Corbin, 257–58, Fernández Fúster, 129). We owe to the English the habit of spending extended periods of time by the sea. Since the end of the eighteenth century, Brighton, the first location of the new beach culture, attracted masses of health-conscious tourists inspired by the works of the physician Richard Russell (Corbin, 256–7).

Initially equipped for health (and, not in the last place, mental health) facilities, beaches were quickly transformed into lucrative enterprises. Thus, in the nineteenth century, the Dieppe beach asylum in France ceded place to tourist accommodations of the *Hôtel Royal* (Fernández Fúster, 130). As soon as sea bathing became a mass phenomenon, hygienic discourse about the beach was complemented and gradually overridden by the speculations about the moral, rather than medical, consequences of the emerging beach culture. Beach attire shocked educated beach visitors, as it shifted the established symbolization of the body—the female body, in the first place. The beach was the only place where one could catch a glimpse of the legs and thighs of high-class women, who elsewhere were subject to the taboo of showing their lower body. Outside the bedroom and the boudoir, beach was also the location where one could see a married woman with her hair undone (Felsky). In 1871, the Spanish writer Amós de Escalante cunningly remarked that beach visitors hoping to recover from illnesses were risking the health of their bodies for the peace of their minds, as their imaginations were shaken by the unseen vision of the female bathers (23). De Escalante, of course, was referring to the effects upon male beach visitors. Even from the distance of our own contemporary permissiveness, present-day readers of old beach narratives might experience a mild shock when they find out that on some nineteenth-century beaches female bathers were assisted by muscular male attendants, specially hired to carry them into the water in their arms.

By rearranging moral norms and taboos, shifting the limits of the public and the private, blurring the class and status distinctions, and resymbolizing the body, the beach became a privileged scenario for the discussions about the effects of Modernity in late nineteenth–early

twentieth-century Spanish literature. In this chapter, I will examine the interconnected discussions of Modernity, morality, norms of behavior, and female body in the beach narratives written in Spain in the 1920s. By doing so, we will see how, for the male narrator of Wenceslao Fernández Flórez's beach chronicles, the disturbing image of bare females on the beach became the starting point for reassessing the whole set of moral norms and class values of the slow and belated Spanish Modernity. However, in the male-dominated discussion about modern civilization, body, and morals, beach narratives written by women are the ones that provide the richest and the most radical interpretation of Modernity and, especially, of its limitations. While reading Carmen de Burgos's *La flor de la playa*, we will see how quickly this female writer moved beyond the problematic of nudity in order to question the very foundations of modern civilization. According to de Burgos, the superficial laxity of the beach morals left unshaken the patriarchal moral order, internalized by male and female subjects independently of how much flesh they were allowed to exhibit or see. Nor was modern civilization's fundamental split with nature bridged by the apparent return to the elements, which the emerging leisure culture seemed to promise to the humanity. The contrast between the male moral anxiety and the female demand for a more radical renovation marks the discussion of Modernity in the pages of the twentieth-century Spanish beach narratives.

ELEGANCE AND DISTINCTION WITHIN THE LEISURE CULTURE: WENCESLAO FERNÁNDEZ FLÓREZ'S BEACH CHRONICLES

Wenceslao Fernández Flórez's Biarritz chronicles, published as newspaper columns in the late 1920s and collected in *The Conquest of Horizon* (1932), provide a telling framework for understanding the disturbing feeling of shaken social differences and moral norms that an educated bourgeois male coming from slowly developing Spain experienced on a modern French beach. Fernández Flórez's essays also suggest that the promises of a cultural change and the democratization of moral norms, with which the emerging leisure culture lured modern societies, were short-lived and illusory. As we shall see, the old-regime ruling classes were quick to introduce hierarchy and distinction into the seemingly undifferentiated leisure spaces and the apparently relaxed codes of leisure behavior.

Fernández Flórez situates his bourgeois narrator from Madrid on the French coast, in the high-class resort of Biarritz. The author

presents his narrator as a “respectable Spaniard,” emphasizing his nationality and moral status in order to create a distance from the milieu described in these humorous essays (Echeverria). The narrator’s position allows him to grasp multiple national, class, and moral tensions that define the lifestyle of the beach resort. However, as we shall see, this narrator’s bourgeois male perspective does not allow him to approach in an equally lucid way all the problematic issues of leisure culture that he perceives. Thus, although his sharp criticism of the “elegant” lifestyle of Biarritz hits the very center of the problem of hegemony within modern culture, he is incapable of an equally direct attitude when dealing with the sight of the female body on the beach.

The narrator’s sense of belonging elsewhere enables him to follow critically the transformation of the new leisure culture into an “elegant” lifestyle with its own internal hierarchies. In an eloquent passage, he describes with sarcasm the moment when the arguably undifferentiated beach space became marked by high-society distinctions and was introduced into the order of class values. In Fernández Flórez’s rendering, the short presence of royalty sufficed to transform an unpretentious seaside area into a popular high-class dwelling:

All right, well, you see . . . The Côte Basque beach was nothing special. But one day a prince heir to Europe’s richest crown stepped on that sand, swam between those waves and spent a quarter of an hour dissolving in those waters his epidermic secretions. That sufficed. Next day, the Côte Basque beach was admitted into the high society.

(74)

The Spanish writer’s account faithfully reproduces the ways in which, after the mid-nineteenth century, the upper classes managed to maintain their waning hegemony by attributing to themselves the power to enshrine selected locations of the new and seemingly democratic bourgeois leisure culture. Fernández Florez’s beach essays suggest that the aristocracy and upper classes appropriated the notion of modern leisure time by subjecting the lifestyle of a beach resort to the code of “elegant” behavior. In these essays, the Spanish author’s selective use of the word “elegant” can be analyzed in terms of Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of habitus and distinction. According to Bourdieu, distinction manifests itself as an irreflexive bodily habit, or habitus, of “good taste” acquired through education by members of an “in” group. Habitus is meant to become an individual’s second nature, “the apparently most insignificant techniques of the

body—ways of walking or blowing one’s nose, ways of eating or talking” that reveal “the most fundamental principles of construction and evaluation of the social world” (1984, 466).

In the Spanish language, the words “elegance” and “elegant,” initially referring to a well-measured manner of expressing oneself according to the requirements of taste, shifted their meanings between 1869 and 1884, when they started describing practices related to the human body (cf. Bermingham; Murray). In the 1869 edition, the *Dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy* only defined elegance as a way of expression. *The Dictionary’s* 1884 edition, however, furnished a second meaning of the word that was now presented as applicable, “in a restrictive sense, to a person who dresses with entire subjection to fashion, and also to suits and things adjusted to it” (RAE 1884, 410, III). The shift in the meaning of the word, from an acquired knowledge to a practice similar to Bourdieu’s habitus, appears to have happened after the bourgeois revolution of 1868, during the period of consolidation of the Spanish middle class (Bahamonde and Martínez, ch. 3). Apparently, the “restrictive” meaning was perceived as such through the 1920s, when Fernández Flórez wrote his beach chronicles.

In the *Dictionary’s* definition, it is easy to notice the repressive function of “elegance,” subjecting the individual to the dictatorship of fashion. In his beach essays, Fernández Flórez, still emphasizes the word’s special meaning within the Biarritz community, and also focuses on the repressive function of the code of “elegant” behavior marked by arbitrary distinctions:

When one is searching for beauty, one knows at least where it is; but elegance—within the special elegance of the beach—is unforeseeable and unreliable. [. . .] Am I making a fool of myself here?—one keeps asking himself with disquiet—. Must I stay, or must I leave? May I like this cock-tail, or shall I declare it abominable? Shall I light a Turkish, or an English cigar now? Am I enjoying myself here, or am I bored? I need an urgent help from an authority.

(“What Life Do You Lead?” 74–75, italics in the original)

In Flórez’s view, “elegance” manifests itself as a status-related lifestyle within leisure culture, thus taking over the modern practice of doing nothing: “At what time must you take a walk? Where? In what place must you drink your aperitif? One has to be particularly cautious when choosing the place for aperitif, because it characterizes you more than any other act [. . .]. The result of this quest for elegance is a feeling of a light nervous anxiety” (74–75).

If the upper classes established their hegemony over leisure culture by dictating the codes and norms of the “elegant” lifestyle, the norms of beach attire, while they seemed surprisingly lax by the standards of high society, also had to be reinvented. “Elegant” beach fashion was the order of the day, while popular nineteenth-century manuals of beach hygiene advised bathers to wear clothes that one could hardly call “elegant,” as they were imitating the sea folk’s traditional dress: sailors’ suits and fishermen’s blouses and trousers. A twentieth-century invention, small bathing suits made of a light fabric and exhibiting the bathers’ thighs were another “elegant” innovation that testified to the end of the hygienic approach to sea bathing. By the 1920s, when Flórez wrote his chronicles, wearing a bathing suit was considered a mark of elegance: “The creative and formal elegance characteristic of the 1920s also affected the bathing-dress; when it did not resemble evening-dress in its refinement and luxury, it was always pleasant and never vulgar,” writes costume historian Davanzo Poli (41). Flórez’s account eloquently demonstrates that the refined quality of the beach attire in the 1920s was but an external sign indicating that the upper classes had finished reestablishing their hegemony over the leisure culture, achieved by resymbolizing the female dress and body, the female lower body in particular.

The Spanish writer’s description foreshadows the historian’s conclusion quoted above, as Flórez also stresses the affinity of the bathing suit with the evening dress. However, as Flórez’s essays show, the elegant enshrinement of the bathing suit into an upper-class attire was a final point of a long process. It was anxiety and confusion that educated males initially experienced when their eyes caught a sight of the tabooed body parts on the beach. And it was this confused reaction that made the enshrinement of the swimsuit necessary in the first place. Flórez’s texts suggest that, by the end of the 1920s, educated Spanish males still considered female thighs a disquieting visual novelty, while members of the French upper classes had already made showing thighs a fact of life of the beach resorts. In the essay “Preoccupations of a Respectable Spaniard,” Flórez draws an almost surrealistic image of a resort town featuring as its main attraction nothing less than “two thousand of female thighs and legs”:

One car, four legs. These are two girls who are traveling—with their swimsuits already on—towards the beach. More cars. More thighs. One proceeds along the coastal road following the fringe or young ladies sitting yanqui style, their legs on the fences, three meters above.

(76)

The exaggerations and irony characteristic of Flórez's narrator who emphasizes the most striking aspects of local lifestyle make visible the rave of a Spanish male visitor facing the display of bodies in public spaces. The narrator then tries to overcome the shock by speculating on the sedative effect of so much human flesh. The beach nudity, he argues, does not bring humanity back to an uncivilized natural state. In his view, the exposure to naked bodies furthers hierarchical distinctions rather than neutralizes them, because it ascribes a status value to one's capacity to perceive critically the civilizing effect of the human clothing itself:

If we are dealing with a vulgar spectator, this experience would hardly bring him results other than some limited knowledge of Humanity through its legs. [. . .] But if the spectator enjoys philosophical speculations, he wouldn't help meditating about the ways in which human behavior would change if everyone wore nothing but maillots.

(77)

In his ironic wording, Flórez suggests a way of avoiding scandal by encouraging an enlightened spectator to keep cool, at a philosophical distance from the temptation. He concludes that nudity's only purpose is to reestablish in rights the proper clothing and, thus, confirm the moral values of civilization—of the Spanish civilization in the first place. However, the obvious ironic overtones of this passage indicate that this “respectable” male narrator is yet to reach the philosophical distance that he exalts: “This way, the Biarritz beach makes us so bor- ingly respectable that we start feeling overwhelmed with understanding and gratitude towards those Spanish bishops who have recently prescribed wise measures enforcing proper beach attire” (77).

The ironic approach does not allow Flórez's narrator to see beyond the nature vs. civilization dichotomy. Instead of accepting the possible liberating effects of breaking the taboos, he tries in various ways to neutralize the shock of female nudity. In the example above, he concluded that the contemplation of the female body can only strengthen the need of restrictions. In the essay “Maillot's Evolution,” Florez arrives at a similar conclusion through a dialectical twist, as he states that any woman's dress is but a transformation of a maillot: “Among all existing things, a woman's suit is the only one that carries within it the germ of its complete opposite” (106).

The idea seems to serve well the need to overcome male anxiety making the difference between a dressed and an undressed female body almost nonexistent and therefore inoffensive. Interestingly enough,

Flórez's account allows us to see that, apart from individual male disquiet, economic and class interests were at play in the design of women's bathing suits. The Spanish author describes how, in the course of one beach season, the maillot fashion became increasingly complex and began relying on accessories. Next, the fashion industry interfered and took over, thus completing the institutionalization of this type of clothing by converting it, from a simple maillot, into a complicated "swimming suit." As the essay suggests, swimming suits became acceptable in public places other than the beach (i.e., in a bar and a hotel) as soon as the fashion industry converted it into a little relative of the normal suit:

In September, things became really complicated. In a huge recently inaugurated hotel next to the beach a swimsuit competition was celebrated. A little after, there was a parade of live mannequins wearing new models in front of the numerous and distinguished clientèle of a *bar*. Actually, one can no longer call "maillots," but rather "swimming suits," these pieces that fashion houses pretend to launch. Vivid colors, complicated shapes, fringes, laces, hats similar to the ones *jockeys* wear, fantastic capes . . . , luxury taking over the sincerity that in this case seemed to be unshakable.

(104, italics in the original)

In the continuation of the essay, the author describes the easy ways by which, with the help of accessories and scissors, a swimming suit can be transformed into an evening gown and then back into a maillot (105). The writer treats the maillot as an uncanny object that needs to be naturalized and made familiar by establishing its genealogy with the more familiar pieces of clothing. Thus, Flórez's essay grasps the direction taken by leisure culture, which eventually neutralized the shock of female exposure by means of validating previously tabooed body parts and modes of behavior. Since the author positions himself as an enlightened, distant, and foreign witness of the new leisure lifestyles, he insightfully identifies some of the new culture's problematic points that have to do with new ways of securing old hierarchies within the modern order. However, in his ironic discourse, old hierarchies remain intact and only lightly shifted, reduced to familiar old structures and made acceptable through genealogies, like the disturbing maillot.

No matter how ironic, the narrator's strife to naturalize the sight of the exposed female body as a mean of reaffirming the need for proper clothing does not allow him to reconsider the function of the tabooing itself. As we shall now see, a female writer contemplating

male and female bodies on the beach arrives at much further-reaching conclusions. Among them are the need for a revised model of nature and civilization and the demand for a new set of moral norms.

NATURE AND MAKE-UP: CARMEN DE BURGOS'S *THE BEACH FLOWER*

When in 1914 writer and journalist Carmen de Burgos arrived at the Portuguese beach of Praya de Mazos, she also meditated on the questions of status and distinction that we have examined in Flórez's later essays. In her diary, de Burgos praises the small resort town for the absence of tourists, and compares it to the more elegant Portuguese destination of Figueira da Foz ("Portuguese San Sebastián"), where "all good folks looking for rest and economy mix with elegant people boasting white trousers and monocles—the utmost luxury of fashionable beaches—, and with young ladies wearing large hats and floating dresses" (Utrera, 254). De Burgos's experiences of the Portuguese beaches became the subject matter of her short novel *The Beach Flower* (*La flor de la playa*), published in 1920. Contrary to the writer's diary, her beach novel examines even more fundamental questions than those of status and class distinction within leisure culture. In *The Beach Flower*, de Burgos treats the issues of status as mere signs of the essential inconsistency that mark modern civilization, making true Modernity a task that is simultaneously necessary and impossible. Its other manifestations include an erroneously formulated opposition between nature and civilization and an equally erroneous set of moral norms, internalized by the individuals.

The novel is set in a small beach resort in Portugal, where two lovers from Madrid—Elisa, a seamstress, and Enrique, a justice ministry clerk—come to spend their summer vacation. Unlike Flórez's narrator who only paid attention to women, Carmen de Burgos's characters perceive as disquieting both female and male bathing. Thus, when describing the bathers, de Burgos's third-person narrator intermittently adopts male and female perspectives. On the one hand, the narrator follows with attention the *bañero*, male bath attendant, whose duty, besides caring for the bathers' safety, included carrying the bathers in his arms into the water. At this point, the narrator is curious about the erotic nature of the bath attendant's job:

Sometimes the attendant would leave his duty in order to mix with them [the girls bathing], under the hypocritical pretext of assisting them that all bath attendants use. It is generally believed that bath attendants are

immune to the impression of beautiful bodies, indifferent to everything, as if instead of bath attendants contemplating healthy bodies in the plenitude of enjoyment, they were physicians tired of looking at sickly bodies suffering martyrdom in a hospital room.

(323–324)

As soon as the question about the erotic effect of sea bathing is posed, the narrator changes the point of view and takes a close look at the *bañero* himself. From the following detailed description one can deduce that the beach experiences also provided food for thought for female spectators. However, de Burgos's narrator finds it hard to represent the undressed male body directly without mythologizing it, without assimilating the object of contemplation to the landscape:

The bath attendant was a **red sea beam, a product of the ocean and of the Colares wineries combined**. He had a bath attendant's body, the type that the profession engenders; skinny, with strong tendons, his skin **red as acacia wood** and his hair **yellow as ripe corn**. His beard was rare, **saffron-color** and curly, with a little bit of the **green color of algae** at the roots of the hair; his eyes were **sea-green**, very narrow and very hidden in order not to betray the sparks of voluptuousness, his legs were smooth, as if **the double action of salty water and ardent sun** had thinned and polished them.

(324, emphases are mine)

The hybrid figure of the *bañero*, a male body perfected by nature thanks to his place within the infrastructure of the modern sea-bathing enterprise, can be seen as emblematic of de Burgos's interpretation of beach culture and of nature in general. The author views the beach with its new tourist industry as a cultural battlefield, where the conflict between nature and civilization, which had marked the dawn of Modernity, is reenacted, reassessed, and packaged anew as part of modern consumer culture. In the final balance of the novel, the readers (de Burgos's mostly female readers) are left to doubt whether it is possible to try to reestablish contact with nature other than the one that is already prefabricated by modern civilization. The most telling examples of such prefabricated nature in the novel are the instances of beach tourism, producing sensuous bodies that seem to be part of nature, as well as the make-up that imitates a suntan.

The author conveys the message by placing her protagonists into the emblematically modern situations and watching their romance fade because of the lovers' attempt to return to nature and traditional values. In the beginning of the novel, nothing seems to foreshadow

the future failure. Enrique and Elisa are single, independent, and financially self-reliant. Their free union is not sealed by wedlock. They live in Madrid, the capital of Spain. In the novel's first two pages, the reader comes across the references to a train, a coffeehouse, a cinema, an cologne, a branded face cream, and a new perfume. Elisa earns her own living and shares an apartment with a roommate. Enrique, an employee of the Ministry of Mercy and Justice, has access to a paid vacation—a benefit of the modern age and a subject of heated discussions at the time when the novel was written. The couple's romance, although happy and durable, has no visible perspective of becoming a legal marriage, as the lovers' skimpy salaries do not allow them to save enough to start a family (312).

When the couple decides to spend the vacation at the beach, their decision only sounds as yet another mark of the modern lifestyle. However, in the modern beach environment, the true measure of the protagonists' modern condition appears insufficient. Planned like a pleasure trip that would unite the couple, the journey turned into a failure, which is implicitly explained by the lovers' lack of inner modernity, all their modern attributes notwithstanding. Elisa and Enrique never bathed, jealously protecting each other from a glimpse of the bodies of the opposite sex. Instead of sea bathing, they dedicated their time to walking in the countryside, away from the sea and its visual temptations. In addition, once they found themselves far from home and surrounded by strangers, they adopted a conservative code of propriety and began presenting themselves as husband and wife. In the novel, the fact that the lovers reject the touristy beach, love nature, and try to pretend to be a respectable couple are interconnected. They comprise a pattern of behavior that reveals, within the characters' modern personalities, a number of unresolved conflicts that have to do with the status of tradition, morality, and nature in modern civilization.

Among other specifically "modern" scenarios of Carmen de Burgos's novels (urban travel in *The Follower* [*El Perseguidor*, 1917], Art Nouveau Paris in *The Swimming Pool! The Swimming Pool!* [*¡La piscina! ¡La piscina!*, 1930]), the beach stands out as a location where visitors were simultaneously exposed to the elements and to the constructions transforming them into sources of income, to traditional coastal communities, and new tourist accommodations (Establier Perez). Thus, within the context of the little drama of tradition and innovation underlying the story of Enrique and Elisa's failed romantic escape, the peculiar conflation of Nature (always capitalized in the text) and civilization in the remote seaside area opens the doors for a radical reconsideration of the true impact of Modernity on the

individuals whose self-perception is rooted in tradition. The gradual withering of Enrique and Elisa's modern relationship can, thus, be read as a warning about the inevitable failure of modern development that does not include the modernization or secularization of morals. True modernity, de Burgos implies, is hard to achieve, as individual liberation takes longer than the construction of railroads and tram-lines. Moreover, the actual dimension of the drama of the modern subject, as presented in the novel, becomes clear once the reader realizes that, while Modernity is hard to achieve, the return to Nature is also no longer possible.

In the novel, the couple's stay at the beach is portrayed precisely as a doomed attempt to return to Nature in the wrong place and at the wrong time. The narrator communicates from the very beginning that Enrique and Elisa planned their trip as an escape to Nature: "They were going to rest there, to enjoy Nature, to be happy, living for each other [. . .]" (318). But in contrast with the Nature that the protagonists anticipated, the beach landscape in the novel is permeated by the signs of modern civilization. In order to get to the beach, Enrique and Elisa took a tram that "connected little villages and communities disseminated in the valley and in the folds of the mountain" (318). While contemplating the old seaside village—now a developing beach resort—they notice a hybrid building announcing that progress had already arrived: it was an old cabin with a sign "Telegraph" on the balcony (319). A larger, old building by the beach had "pretensions of a hotel"; it was full. While looking for a free room, the protagonists saw more signs of tourist transformation: hotels, completely reserved, new constructions by the seaside, also reserved; hotels in villages away from the sea, now brought close to the seaside thanks to a new highway:

Everything was full and booked.[. . .] Everyone must have felt attracted to that little hotel, the first one to be found. They started their pilgrimage in search of home.[. . .] There were few scattered houses already forming the first lines of what would later become streets. Almost all of them were new houses, many were under construction, they could say that they were witnessing the birth of a village. But everything was rented; in the beginning of the highway that followed the coast in order to connect some little coastal villages with others, a building taller than the rest dominated the landscape, lonely and earnest, elongated, with a terrace over the sea and a straw shed. It boasted pompously several sonorous names, as if one was not enough: "Hotel Royal Rellevua." There was nothing available there either.

(319–320)

The lodging that the exhausted Enrique and Elisa finally found was nothing more than a cabin in an old ship, transformed into a rustic inn and bearing the name of “The Beach Flower.” The oxymoronic name of the hotel appears to contain a promise that, even on the modern beach, Nature can flourish. In fact, deprived of any attributes of modern civilization, such as a bath, a toilet or a comfortable mattress, the accommodation in The Beach Flower seemed to suit perfectly the lovers’ dream of returning to Nature. They immediately began anticipating an “idyllic” experience. The narrator describes the setting as “classic” and “primitive”, leaving it to the more educated readers to guess that Enrique and Elisa’s “idyllic” adventure had some venerable antecedents in ancient bucolic tradition:

Elisa had accepted it, not without disgust comparing it with the rooms of the hotels to which they were accustomed. But that place was so impregnated with the **classical flavor of primitive life** that she finally liked it, remembering all the **romantic novels about fishermen** that she had read while sewing during the long winter nights in Madrid in order to entertain Remedios. They hugged, happy to find themselves alone in that room, which was to host an **idyll so diligently prepared**.

(320, my emphases)

In their “idyllic” escape, the two lovers dedicated their days to playing the role of a married couple and contemplating nature. The beach, however, kept attracting their thoughts and fantasies, even though they did not confess it to one another. In de Burgos’s rendering, the beach and freedom from ties are mutually related and opposed to the protagonists’ desire of an old-style marriage close to nature: “Sometimes, the one and the other thought how different their life would have been if they lived alone. Then they would have friends and fun . . . They would go to the casino . . . They would stay at the beach . . . They would take part in every aspect of life of the colony” (352). The protagonists’ inner conservatism does not allow them to accept the beach and instead brings them temptations and worries that also tormented Flórez’s “respectable Spaniard”: the fear of the female body. In *The Beach Flower*, de Burgos suggests that not only males, but also anyone committed to traditional values is prone to the fear of beach frivolity. Enrique was anxious of Elisa’s glimpse of other men: “She could not turn her head without making him upset. . . . She was playing the role of his wife and he was more jealous of her, his spouse, as he would have been, had he really married her”(330). But in her own role of a “respectable Spaniard,” Elisa was

equally tormented by jealousy and anxiety and would have preferred to see all female legs well covered:

On those days both of them were greatly upset. Why did Enrique have to keep looking at all the women? She was acting as a wife and felt ridiculed in front of other women, as if she had been defeated in a duel of sorts that always happens in the presence of a man. She knew only too well their tricks. Girls learn them from their mothers when they are little They want them to be chaste and yet carry them around, naked first and with their legs bare later on, until they become women.

(330)

Significantly enough, the couple's leisure, marked by a rejection of the beach culture and an attraction toward Nature, led them to boredom and subsequent disappointment with each other. Their urban, modern relationship lost its meaning once the two of them tried to reinvent it as a traditional marriage within the natural environment. Implicit in the narrator's explanation of their romantic failure is an accusation of Nature, "too vast" for an individual, and a demand for a new, modern model of relationship. In the spirit of the modern times, the narrator describes the psychological mechanism of love as a "sentimentalism machine." Made for use in a big city, Enrique and Elisa's "machine" was destroyed in an idyllic natural landscape:

The one and the other were tired, maybe because by living so isolated, so dedicated to a love that could not resist such a test, they had forced too much the sentimentalism machine. Maybe the landscape, too vast, too strong, diminished them, relegated them to the secondary role which made their fatigue more oppressive.

(352)

Thus, Enrique and Elisa's return to Nature in a beach resort town can only be read as a doomed plan to turn back the cultural clock. At this point, the narrator ironically revisits the protagonists' anticipation of their stay at the beach as "idyllic." In the final turn, the reader is faced with Elisa's astonishing conclusion that the authentic idyll is to be found in the city, while Nature is only capable of furnishing idyllic surrogates:

[. . .] their picturesque and strange new experience had erased the memories of their years in Madrid, their amorous walks, their difficulties in finding a place to be alone. . . . **All the true idyll, lived with**

sincerity, without pretending to idealize it, without giving to it importance, was falling apart, slipping away in the false, skillfully arranged idyll whose main character could only be Nature itself.

(352, emphases are mine)

The “beach flower” faded without bearing fruit, and by the end of the trip the couple dissolved all by itself. Only on the train approaching Madrid could Elisa recover the feeling of her true self after she carefully depilated her eyebrows and spilled on her chest a generous amount of cologne. She disliked the tan on her hands—the result of walking under the sun. However, she was happy with the tan on her face. The natural tan gave her the look that the metropolitan divas tried hard to achieve with make-up: “She observed with satisfaction her tanned skin, it had the fashionable color that the elegant women imitated adding iodine tincture to the water in their wash-basins” (362). Elisa’s satisfied praise of the natural tan for its ability to look similar to make-up reads as an epitaph to the quest for true nature in the modern world.

Earlier we have seen that de Burgos’s protagonists experienced a return to nature as a paradoxically false and prefabricated idyll, in which they could find no place for themselves or their romance. As the author suggests, for modern couples such as Enrique and Elisa, there is no escape back to Nature, as there is no return to a traditional model of relationship. The signs of nature are ciphers incomprehensible to the modern individuals, says the narrator in an earlier passage describing “the undecipherable Chinese characters which Nature writes across the green or yellow skin of its most special melons, as if it were a producer’s label” (328). A producer of unreadable labels marking its own commodity—such is the only existing Nature in de Burgos’s novel.

De Burgos’s firm reduction of Nature to a productive force or man-made creation, as well as her warning that any escape from civilization is an illusion destructive for a modern individual, provide an important insight about the shifts in the Enlightened model of universe that industrial development brought. As the author suggests, modern individuals can no longer exist within the “nature vs. civilization” dichotomy, as they are radically alienated from nature by the forces of mass production. Moreover, de Burgos’s systematic application of the terms related to mechanical production, to phenomena considered natural (such as love, fruits of the earth, or the human body) indicate that not only a direct contact with nature, but also a direct language for describing nature is no longer available.

In de Burgos's diagnostic of the modern world, the "nature vs. civilization" dichotomy seems, therefore, easily resolved by declaring nature no longer relevant.

However, the other set of problems to which de Burgos's characters fall prey does not find solution, except for a negative one, within the novel. Elisa and Enrique, who ruin their relationship by trying to fit it into the traditional moral norms, have no "modern" type of relationship available to them. If nature can be assimilated and even accepted as a prefabricated and fabricating commodity, there is no label available for a free union of a man and a woman. That is why, after their sojourn as a husband and wife failed, and the train brought them back to Madrid, the lovers separated. They could still salute each other from their respective carriages before the drivers took different roads. Prior to leaving the train, Elisa had decided that the hat, which symbolized her fake status as a respectable wife, should stay on the shelf, as if a distracted traveler had accidentally left it there (363).

As in Flórez's description of the beach lifestyle, in Elisa's final praise of suntan as an effective imitation of the "elegant" make-up, the category of elegance appears as a configuring force of the modern culture. For Flórez, "elegance" allows high classes and fashion companies to take over the yet-unmarked leisure time and establish control over the bodies of female bathers, not yet dressed according to norms. For Carmen de Burgos, "elegance" is a sign of commodified nature, the only nature accessible for modern subjects. In Flórez, the imperative of elegance comes from a beach resort town where modern fashions and new ways of life are launched. In de Burgos, it is considered "elegant" to look tanned, as if one had just come back from a beach resort. Therefore, both authors suggest, it is on the beach that modern civilization dictates its norms. The beach is also the place where the unresolved conflicts within the modern civilization are most apparent.

The visible anxieties of beach visitors, described by both authors, allow present-day readers to witness the challenges that modernity brought to moral norms, the dress codes, and the rules of behavior that configured the worldview of modern subjects. For the theoretical thinkers, it took several more decades to focus critically on some of these challenges, so vividly described in the early twentieth-century beach narratives. In the light of Adorno and Horkheimer's pessimistic interpretation of the ways in which Enlightened thought treated nature and Habermas's later reconsideration of the project of Modernity itself, the old popular beach stories should be read as early testimonies of the

contradictions of modern civilization that became most visible in the areas where technological development arrived late.

In 1984, writer Elena Soriano eloquently summarized the relevance of the beach setting for the contemporary discussion of Modernity. In the foreword to her then unpublished novel *The Beach of the Mad People* (*La playa de los locos*, 1954–1984) the writer described how, in the 30 years that passed since the text was written, the tourist industry took over the previously wild Cantabrian beach:

During a brief visit last summer, I found with astonishment that the excavator's bites of the urbanistic expansion destroyed almost the entire slope that lead to the lighthouse [. . .], so that now it is transformed into a succession of terraces hosting scenic views, tourist accommodations, pubs, discotheques, campings, parking lots, ramps, and cement stairs with metal hand-rails facilitating the descent to the very crowded and formerly deserted Beach of the Mad, as the folks from the Cantabrian village of Suances used to literally call it at the times when it inspired me to write the love story which in the current setting would be unfeasible.

(8–9)

The old story, the writer stated, would be impossible in the setting of a completely modernized beach where nature is entirely subjected to civilization. The old conflicts of the modern civilization, however, remain the same. As Soriano argues, the contradictions of Modernity were as pressing in 1984 as they were in 1954:

I want to affirm, and I mean it, that were I to write the novel again, I would deal with the same topics because I think that [. . .] the sensual enjoyment of nature, the struggle between instinct and reason, the sentimental education, the aspiration of the absolute, the taboo of female virginity, the extreme rationalism, the conflicts of sexuality, the resistance to alienation, the wound of time, the nostalgia for the Paradise lost, the desperate renouncement of the impossible [. . .] many things, better or worse examined in this book, continue being relevant and posing important problems in the current human condition.

(9)

Soriano's text, filled with the references to the fundamental categories and texts of Enlightened thought, indicates that even in the Spain of 1984, modernity was still an "unfinished project," even though there was no beach left to represent its contradictions. Indeed, the twentieth-century beach narratives give twenty-first-century beach tourists something to think about.

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SECTION II



FROM THE MEDUSA TO THE MOTHER

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CHAPTER 6



MARY AUGUSTA WARD'S LITERARY PORTRAITS OF THE ARTIST AS MEDUSA

Linda M. Lewis

Novelist and literary critic Mary Augusta Ward, who published under her married name of “Mrs. Humphry Ward,” was fascinated with the topic of female genius. In her critical introductions to the Haworth edition of *The Life and Work of the Sisters Brontë*, which she edited in 1899–1900, Ward expresses her “particularly vivid feeling for the genius,” the “passion,” and “strange power” of the Brontës, especially Charlotte and Emily. One of Ward’s fictional characters, David Grieve, experiences an epiphany of self-awareness while reading Charlotte’s novels—as Ward herself allegedly did; another character dies reciting a poem of Emily’s—as did Ward (Trevelyan, 165, 307). In her work on the Brontës, Ward established herself as a serious critic of female aesthetics—at least as female criticism was defined a century ago. Beth Sutton-Ramspeck notes that Ward’s prefaces are the first serious feminist criticism of the Brontës, placing them in the context of German and French romanticism and Russian realism rather than trivializing them as the work of three eccentric sisters from Yorkshire who saw ghosts and imagined Gothic horrors (59–62).

The Brontës were Mary Ward’s literary foremothers. In the decade and a half prior to the Brontë work with its groundbreaking insights on the Brontës’ art and feminine aesthetics, Ward published her first three novels (1884; 1886; 1892), each of which features a fictional woman as artist—in the first novel an actress, in the second a violinist, in the third a painter. Ward’s women artists are invariably scintillating,

mesmerizing, passionate, and ambitious. They also abet their creator in entertaining the most interesting questions of what price a woman must pay for art, whether love quickens art or stifles it, and what use is the female artist to make of her considerable powers. Ward's female artists are also temptresses and sirens; they are Circe, Vivien, Undine, Salome, and Medusa, transfixing and freezing the men who desire them. This quality suggests that the persona of the female artist is at once more fascinating and more dangerous than the personae of other mortals—certainly more so than those of the sisters from Hawthorne whose artistry Ward considered the height of artistic prowess. Although Ward adapts a powerful myth already a part of the masculine repertoire for expressing the feminine Other, she balks at unleashing the full power of the very myth that she invokes, and she does so by “saving” the artists from art and for domesticity. While her explorations of the artist-as-Medusa intrigue, they fail to satisfy.

Criticism on the model of matrilineal succession holds that women artists have been able to represent themselves using the same materials, the same syntax and language, the same literary tradition available to male artists. This is not to say creating a woman's literature has been easy—given the centuries of prohibition concerning women's “place” and women's disbarment from the academy, the classics, and literary patronage. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their influential work on the emergence of the writing woman of the nineteenth century, posit, in fact, a disturbance, distrust, “dis-ease” among literary women of Mary Augusta Ward's century (51). Yet they persisted and developed a female art. Women writers have successfully used the same “mother tongue” as the male author but have enriched art with female experience; additionally, as the woman artist has become less of a rarity, some find mentors in the works of their foremothers, as Ward did in the Brontës. A number of feminist scholars suggest, however, that female creativity involves bending and reshaping received sources, whether linguistic, psychological, anthropological, or mythological. Lacking a Faust or Prometheus to validate her iconoclasm or her subjectivity, for example, the woman as artist has committed a Promethean theft of sorts: she has appropriated and reenvisioned myth to empower her art—the myth of the Medusa being the most powerful. In Freudian thought the Medusa represents the fear of decapitation (i.e., castration)—death at the hands of the female, hence the most horrific of male deaths. In her landmark essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous, while proposing an *écriture féminine* of writing from the “Dark Continent” of the female body, comments on the same ancient source, saying that phallogocentric

discourse has riveted the female between two horrifying myths: the abyss or the Medusa because “they need femininity to be associated with death” (255).

In *Dancing with Goddesses: Archetypes, Poetry and Empowerment*, Annis Pratt, noting that Medusa’s snake locks are either the object of phallic worship or the dread of castration, says that in the Victorian era the “Medusa rage” of women is directed against norms that deny sensuality as a natural attribute of women (13, 35). If Ward invokes the Medusa myth to specify the power of woman-as-artist, then, she also evokes woman’s threatening sexual power. Her Medusa can smite her male admirers with impotence, leaving them stunned and emasculated, unless, of course, they approach—as Cixous says—as “trembling Perseuses moving backward toward us, clad in apotropes.” In Ward’s three early novels the female artist is a Medusa figure, exercising power over her admirers who are fascinated alternately by her art and by her person. Whether Circe (the painter Elise), Vivien (the actress Isabel), or Medusa (the violinist Rose), she holds the power to turn into stone her would-be Perseus. This Medusa power results from both her sexual attractiveness and artistry, through the power that the man who gazes upon her perceives (or fears) she has. And if he perceives this power, then she holds it. In her selection of this most horrific of female myths and in employing the various incarnations of the power of female artistry/sexuality, Ward creates fictional artists who astonish even their creator.

Mary Ward’s first novel, *Miss Bretherton* (1884), is the only one of the three under consideration in which Ward selects a woman artist as its protagonist, and uses as its central theme “our chaotic many-headed public opinion about art and artists” (224). In her memoirs Ward acknowledges that Miss Bretherton was an immature experiment, an exercise in which she set out to study the relationship of the actress to her role, her beauty or plainness to her art. She wanted to prove whether “there [is] a dramatic art—exact, difficult, supreme—or is there not?” (*WR* II, 16) and to affirm art that is “conscious, trained, deliberate” (*MB*, 225). For the romance interest of this first novel, Ward opts for a contemporary version of the Pygmalion myth, with the young actress Isabel Bretherton falling under the influence of Eustace Kendal, a prematurely gray, older “artist” (actually a critic of French literature) who wishes to transform her from an intellectual ugly duckling into a swan princess. In fact Ward says in the 1909 preface and in her memoirs that her fictional actress is based upon the British stage star Mary Anderson, who had played Galatea and Perdita to the acclaim, apparently, of all London—including Mary

Ward, who testifies that she was “touched, captured, carried away” by Anderson’s art (*WR* II, 15). The novel is narrated through the sensibility of Kendal/Pygmalion, a middle-aged aesthete who admits, in understatement, “I have some hopes of modifying [Isabel]” and who has rather an easier task than Shaw’s Henry Higgins was to undertake because already Isabel, a picture of “youth and grace and loveliness” speaks beautifully and carries herself like a countess (*MB*, 291, 258). That the undereducated Isabel has garnered accolades for her performances is—according to Kendal—testimony to the inferiority of the British stage and British audiences in comparison to their French counterpart (according to Ward the embarrassing inferiority of English dramatic art being a frequent topic of conversation in her circle). Conversely, the acclaim of the English philistinism is, in Kendal’s view, merely further proof of Isabel’s inferiority.

In *Miss Bretherton* Ward depicts several artists, among them the painter Forbes and the playwright Wallace. Forbes is so smitten by Isabel that he fails to see the lack of “finesse” that Wallace and Kendal immediately perceive. He paints and draws Isabel in several poses and attitudes—including a work that alludes to one of the many paintings of Lady Hamilton—another English beauty who was, like Isabel, admired by men for her striking good looks but held in contempt for her ignorance. In fact Ward first displays Isabel at an art museum where more pairs of male eyes are fixed upon the stunner in the gallery than the beauties on canvas. Tracy C. Davis remarks that by the 1890s (the following decade) the professional actress was considerably more respectable than her counterpart in the mid-Victorian period, but that she still seemed “to attract men like bees to honey” (98), as Miss Bretherton draws the artists about London. To the smitten artist Forbes’s Isabel is fresh as a Diana, but to Kendal she plays a more innocent Vivien to Forbes’s gray Merlin, who is “altogether in her toils.” (It is perhaps a relevant parallel that in 1874 Edward Burne-Jones painted himself as the gray, mesmerized Merlin and Mary Zambaco as an enticing Vivien/Nimue with Medusa-like snake locks upon her head—hence the aging Burne-Jones, like both Forbes and Kendal, is frozen and unmanned by the dangerous young seductress.) What Kendal initially fails to see is that he—like the painter Forbes—is falling under the spell of the actress, and it is his unconscious jealousy that prompts his depiction of the Merlin/Vivien pairing as supplanting his own Pygmalion/Galatea fantasy. If the typical versions of the male gaze are voyeurism and fetishism, then the men in *Miss Bretherton* participate, alternately, in each version, and the Pygmalion fantasy is Kendal’s particular fetish. A third artist, Wallace, remains impervious

to the actress's sexual charms. When Isabel aspires to land the leading female role in Wallace's new play, he—loving his art and not loving Isabel Bretherton—resolves to save the drama from the inept actress and sends Kendal to do the dirty work of alerting Isabel to her intellectual and artistic insufficiency. Miss Bretherton can portray no depth of character, Wallace and Kendal agree, because she has no depth of knowledge.

To her credit, Isabel's ignorance is no secret from her, and she manages to become a self-created Galatea. When Kendal offers himself as mentor, he proves stodgy and arrogant, lecturing to her as a "hair-splitting pedant," yet "delighted" to "feel her mind yielding to his." He does, though, introduce her to appropriate mentors in the person of his sister Marie and her French husband Paul, who is like other men in the novel fascinated with Isabel and who sets out to become her tutor and mentor during her Paris sojourn. Aside from the Frenchman, only the women of the novel see the promise of Isabel's talent (as opposed to her mesmerizing beauty), and one of them remarks, "She will surprise us yet." Similarly, Marie immediately perceives the blend of "ignorance and genius" in Isabel; she becomes Isabel's fairy godmother and for her education and edification gives her a copy of George Sand's novel *Consuelo*, a fictional portrait of yet another fascinating artist, the opera star Consuelo whose beauty and talent are paraded upon the stages of Europe. (Invoking Consuelo is here a double invocation to the power of the mother and of mimesis in female creativity: as Consuelo is to Isabel, so George Sand is to Mary Augusta Ward.) Marie, also the first to see that Isabel is cleverly using Kendal and his acquaintances to educate herself, says of the ambitious actress, "She will go find her education" (372, 295, 340, 361, 355). And in this assumption Marie proves to be correct.

At the novel's climax Kendal seems about to fulfill his dream of consoling Isabel when she fails, catching her when she falls. On her return engagement in London, however, her acting demonstrates an intelligence self-attained through study, discipline, and character, and suddenly he is divided from her by "an impassable gulf" of his limitations, not hers. He is frozen and cannot make a marriage offer because he perceives his scholar's life as gray, her actress's life as brilliant. He is as helpless as the rich man gazing upon Lazarus in Abraham's bosom, while she is "Undine [who] had found her soul." And in this novel the soul is not attained by loving a mortal and giving birth to his child, but by the birth of her own art. Thus Isabel is both a Galatea self-created and an Undine self-born. Kendal finds that he is emasculated to the degree that she has attained power through access

to the female (literary and literal)—Marie, George Sand, Consuelo, Isabel herself—and no longer depends upon his [male] mentorship. The novelist, however, provides Kendal a family tragedy (in the death of his sister Marie) that at the denouement brings the lovely young goddess into his arms—as surely as the catastrophe of the burning of Thornfield and death of the madwoman, Bertha, brings Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* into the manly arms of the Byronic Rochester. To Isabel, who is like many nineteenth-century fictional woman artists a motherless child, Marie has become a mother surrogate; therefore Marie’s dying wish that Kendal protect the actress from the rigors of the stage by marrying her carries significant moral weight for both Isabel and Kendal. Ward’s resolution of the novel is suspect, however, in its suggestion that the young artist should abandon her art because she has not the stamina to continue in such a demanding career. Isabel’s illness prompts Marie to conclude that she is too weak for the pursuit of her art is a contrivance in the plot, and Ward resorts to such a ploy because it suits the conventions and expectations of the novel to conclude with a marriage—even though, until the very end, Isabel has never entertained the thought of Kendal as anything more personal than a teacher. Furthermore, she has known all along that he feels only sexual attraction for her, as she says “admiration for me as a woman, contempt for me as an artist!” (400, 371, 326). Henry James wrote to Ward wishing that her actress—who had “too much to spare for Kendal”—had been carried away from her critic/lover who worships her but despises her art. James believed that the excitement, the “ferocity and egotism” (*WR* II, 14) that the effort to create art brings forth in Isabel would have carried this Galatea away from Pygmalion. Or, one could say, have left him bereft as Undine’s knight, frozen as Vivien’s Merlin.

Ward herself castigates *Miss Bretherton* as a “trial trip” and “piece of naïveté,” (*WR* II, 20; II, 16), and others criticized it for a lack of passion and a “dry, theoretical air” (Thesing and Pulsford, 3). Max Creighton, a literary friend, gently chastised Ward for being a critic within her own text, challenging her, “Your object is really to show how criticism can affect a nature capable of receiving it. Now is this properly a subject of art? Is it not too didactic?” (qtd. Trevelyan, 44). Ultimately *Miss Bretherton* is a flawed work, but it is interesting nonetheless because it deals with the female artist’s passion for her work, the sacrifices she must make for it, and the demands that others make of her—as well as the issue of the persona of the artist as separate from or connected to her art. (As Yeats was to speculate, how can one tell the dancer from the dance?) Furthermore, it presents the dilemma of

the female artist as an object of the male gaze and the power of the female artist to mesmerize her male critic, topics to which Ward was to return in two subsequent novels.

Robert Elsmere, Ward's most famous novel, was published in 1888. Its protagonist is an Oxford intellectual, Anglican clergyman, and idealist, who turns activist, doubter, apostate, and, finally, founder of a new religion (based on the human Jesus as opposed to the divine). Critics of Ward's day and of our own have focused not on feminist aesthetics but on the novel as a study of the religious ferment of the Oxford Movement, German skepticism, and secular Christianity in the form of religious/political activism—Elsmere's spiritual quest in the novel. Elsmere is the martyred hero, but his young sister-in-law, the violinist Rose Leyburn, steals the scenes from Elsmere and from everyone else who shares the stage with her. And since her issues are her "divine right of self-development," of "making [her] own destiny" as artist, it is surprising that feminist critics have paid scant attention to Rose's struggle (*RE* I, 380; I, 434).

Called "Miss Artistic" by her sisters, Rose dresses in garb that she assumes to be bohemian—offbeat and flamboyant fashions and huge amber beads; her untamed hair resembles a wild halo (with ringlets "tortured and frizzled like an aureole" or—one might note—untamed serpents). A "bundle of wants," she most wants to be a professional, to leave the Westmoreland district of her youth to study in Berlin or London, then to perform in the great concert halls of Europe. Rose is witty, irreverent, talented, and calculatingly ambitious. Like Isabel Bretherton she is willful, vowing to be an artist no matter what the cost. Also like Isabel, she is astonishingly beautiful: "dazzling," "bewitching," a "child of grace and genius," a "sorceress"—Ward again, as she had done in *Miss Bretherton*, creating the artist as irresistible woman by means of myth and hyperbolic praise. The "magic and mastery" in her touch refer at once to her skill as a violinist and to her ability to play upon men, who cannot take their eyes from her when she performs. When, for example, Elsmere's friend Edward Langham (his name a pun on languor) hears and sees this Medusa for the first time, Ward describes "his face [a]s turned to stone" (I, 9; I, 391; II, 173; I, 411; I, 431; II, 272; I, 318; I, 391).

Robert Elsmere is about various kinds of stony characters—the intellectually frozen, emotionally dead, and religiously inflexible. Because Elsmere and Rose are the novel's most dynamic and vivacious characters, they contrast the frozen, dead, and lethargic ones, especially Edward Langham, Squire Wendover, and (for a large segment of the novel) Catherine Elsmere. Elsmere's wife, Catherine, is

so confined by the rigidity of her Protestantism that she cannot but believe that Rose's passion for the violin is an affront to God, and she cannot function as Robert's soul mate once he has left the priesthood and the church. Elsmere's friend Langham is an effete scholar bored by the Oxford life with its pedantic dons and plodding students; he lacks energy and ambition for study, teaching, and scholarship, or even for sex. Wendover, the country squire of Elsmere's parish, is so obdurate and indifferent about life on his estate that he passively allows his overseer to brutalize the people who live and die in squalor on his land. In the novel the Medusa figure recurs chiefly in connection with the dry impotence of the squire and Langham, both brilliant and both disengaged from human life, human love, human suffering. Both, notes Laura Fasick, are "self-castrated" by "quasi-sexual failures" (27).

Elsmere first encounters the bust of Medusa in the library of the squire, an erudite scholar who has written a famous attack rationally and historically "disproving" the Bible. A father/son relationship develops between the old scholar and the young clergyman, who would like to "beguile" the squire back to life. But Wendover's only passion is knowledge. For example, he ignores or patronizes his eccentric, timid sister Mrs. Darcy (a dried-up writer, a failed artist, and an object lesson of what Rose might become if she lives for art instead of living for womanliness). Furthermore, he takes no interest in the property he has inherited or in the souls who live there in abominable conditions—at least until Elsmere persuades him that a fatal outbreak of cholera on his estate could have been avoided, had the squire been properly engaged in the lives of the poor. In one of the early meetings between the two men, Wendover invites Elsmere as fellow scholar to use his library, and upon each subsequent visit Elsmere makes note of a bust of the Medusa in the squire's library, for the Medusa represents to him "the overgrown and absorbing life of the intellect [which] blights the heart and chills the senses" (I, 465).

When the Byronic Edward Langham visits Elsmere and his new bride, he is taken by Elsmere to visit the squire's library. How appropriate, since he shares with the squire a numb and unproductive intellectualism that has frozen him for life in the world. For Langham has "cheated his creative faculty" and is now lethargic and intellectually impotent. A gifted Oxford tutor and musical connoisseur, he instantly recognizes the talent and passion of Catherine Elsmere's young sister, and he is mesmerized by her playing (as Elsmere had been); he falls under Rose's spell, is entranced by the "passion and romance" of her art, and is jealous of the men in the chamber ensemble in

which she plays when she returns to England after her apprenticeship in Germany (I, 998; I, 318). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note that nineteenth-century women artists are repeatedly attracted to the Byronic/Satanic figure, who seems to be a brother or double (82). Certainly Ward's fictional artist Rose is attracted to Langham with his brooding solitude and Byronic brow. The two perform piano and violin duets, and on such occasions Langham finds that he is "more passionately alive" than he has been in years. Rose's passion and vitality are temporarily exhilarating, but Langham later decides that they are, for him, insanity. He proposes marriage, then jilts Rose because her ambition scares him, and because he is a dead man who dare not let the vibrant Rose tempt him to life again. Ward makes clear, though, that Langham is just as frozen and paralyzed prior to meeting Rose as the squire is before he gets to know Robert Elsmere. Thus it was not the sexual gaze that initially turned Langham to stone, although in the novel we often watch a frozen Langham watching Rose (Rose playing the violin, Rose romping with the family pet, Rose flirting with men whom Langham perceives as rivals). With her wild curls or "feather boa" or fur cap framing her face, however, Rose recalls the Medusa sculpture in the squire's library. On the metaphoric and thematic level, she becomes Langham's Medusa. Further, Langham's stoniness persists as his key identifying factor; he stifles his romantic life as he has stifled his intellectual hopes. He stagnates while Rose blossoms. Like Isabel Bretherton, Rose hones her talent, becoming more proficient in her art. And like Kendal, Langham finds in the female artist rather more spirit and life than he is capable of. Finally he imagines a "fresh gulf" opened between them, leaving Rose—like Lazarus in Abraham's bosom—"transformed on the farther side." The rich man/Lazarus parable used to depict Kendal's temporary separation from Isabel is used also to dramatize Langham's permanent separation from Rose. Langham is a coward, choosing to remain stony because he cannot bear to think of a little house, children, money difficulties, and Rose "spiritually starved, every illusion gone." Wearing his "marble mask" he departs from Rose's life (II, 295; II, 278; II, 290).

Rose Leyburn's creator finally murders the female's art with the weapon of matrimony. Early in the novel Elsmere notes that his vivacious sister-in-law needs a rich, dominant, masterful husband to tame her (the same observation, by the way, that is made of Ward's vivacious female politician, Marcella Boyce, in the novel *Marcella*). Ward generously provides such a man in Hugh Flaxman, an aristocratic widower almost twice Rose's age. Flaxman, like other men, is

fascinated by Rose; he finds the young artist a “beautiful tameless creature” and he longs to “scold her, crush her, love her” (II, 347). In the last one-fifth of the novel Ward is concerned with Elsmere’s settlement house, his crusading, and his death, and she abandons the issue of female artistry, failing to illustrate how Rose’s art is “crushed” by love. For in that final one-fifth of the novel, we never see Rose practicing or performing, never hear her speak about the art for which she has lived. In Rose the novelist has created a character with too much life, too much passion for art, and Ward is incapable or unwilling to entertain the questions of feminine aesthetics that she has raised. As he had responded to *Miss Bretherton*, Ward’s literary friend Henry James wrote Ward, praising the “great and rare beauty” of *Robert Elsmere*, but expressing dissatisfaction with the author’s disposal of Rose:

If she is only not to affirm the full artistic, aesthetic . . . view of life, I don’t exactly see why you gave her so much importance. I think you have made too much of her coquetry, her flippancy, impertinence, etc. as if it were a necessary part of her pursuit, her ambition . . . I . . . don’t like her rich, fashionable marriage and find it too conventionally third volum-y . . . I resent him as the solution of Rose’s problem, which a sort of poetic justice in me would have craved to see fought on lines more characteristic.

(“Introduction,” *RE*)

James’s criticism of *Robert Elsmere* is sound; Ward abandons her fascinating and gifted artist as abruptly as Langham does—effectively silencing her violin and her voice. If the squire and Langham are an object lesson about the selfish, stagnant egotism possible in intellectualism, then one could conclude that Ward saves Rose from the selfish, stagnant egotism that might come from worshiping at the altar of art. The danger seems to be that either form of egotism prohibits engagement with other people, which is offered the male characters through stewardship, teaching, or philanthropy, and to the female characters through marriage and motherhood (a role that seems to have agreed with Mary Ward, but that killed Charlotte Brontë). In her preface to *Villette* Ward says that—while women are “still on sufferance” in other artistic endeavors—only as novelists are women “masters” of their art. This is because, while male novelists study manners, politics, and adventures, women have found their niche in their understanding of love—all kinds of love, but especially between men and women (xxiv–v). She no doubt feels that in the “mastering” of Rose by a distinguished husband, she is writing to her [womanly]

strength as an artist, but what she sacrifices in terms of the issues of female creativity is too great and Flaxman is, as James says, a too-easy solution to Rose's issues.

By removing Rose from center stage, Ward spares her the double threat of becoming a failed artist or a successful one. In the persons of the "little weathered fairy godmother" Mrs. Darcy and the actress Madame Desforêts, Rose is shown two unpleasant alternatives—the former is "a little idiot" and the latter is "not a woman" but a "wild beast." Mrs. Darcy is held in contempt, or held up for amusement, by the squire, Elsmere, and Langham for her "hobbies," which include gardening, keeping an album of signatures, strumming each day on the piano with her tiny, rheumatic fingers, and writing not one, but two novels—apparently both of them abominable. Madame Desforêts is admired by Rose pretty much as the French actress Sarah Bernhardt was admired by Mary Ward, among others. But Langham points out to Rose that Desforêts is selfish and unscrupulous, allowing her young sister to die rather than compromise an artistic life to care for her. Desforêts, in fact, echoes several successful and fascinating actresses presented by women writers: Geraldine Jewsbury's Fornasari in *The Half Sisters*, Charlotte Brontë's Vashti in *Villette*, and George Eliot's Alchirisi in *Daniel Deronda*—fascinating actresses who are also unwomanly because they are not maternal, and who are terrifying because of their calculating careerism. If the squire's failed artist sister or the egomaniacal actress can be the object lesson for Rose, then Ward is demonstrating that Rose is better off with the love of a controlling older man than with art. Moralizing aside, Ward does not convince her reader that the young Medusa "with Wagner and Brahms in her young blood" could settle for domesticity without art (I, 252; I, 161).

An actress or a musician (prior to the days of cinema and sound recordings) performed exclusively in the flesh, drawing attention to the performer's physiognomy and body (chiefly arm, wrist, torso, neck, bosom), that is, the focus of the male sexual gaze in Victorian novels—probably because the voluminous skirts of nineteenth-century fashions concealed other curves from view. Helena Michie speculates that in Victorian novels the parts of the female body noticed serve as synecdoches for the unseen and unmentionable parts—a "synecdochal operation [which] detaches from the heroine's body the hair and the hand and arm, inflating and fetishizing these parts" (98). In *Miss Bretherton* and *Robert Elsmere*, respectively, Isabel and Rose are fetishized as objects of desire as much as—or more than—they are valued as artists. Isabel's rich, golden-brown curls and Rose's

tangled, reddish, pre-Raphaelite locks are repeatedly noted by their admirers. Both women are posed and sketched by male artists as they work—Isabel in costume, Rose practicing her violin. Also Rose is repeatedly complimented for her “beautifully formed” hands and arms—valued more for their quality of pleasing the male eye than for producing fine music. When she plays there is an “enchancing picture-like distinctness” to every curve, and when she concludes, her breast “heaves with excitement and exertion” (*RE*, 19). Thus the various frozen men whom these Medusas attract are captivated by the siren’s pose, whether or not her art is inspired. And mesmerized, they cannot function as objective critics of her work. Laura Mulvey notes in her work on film, in “scopophilia woman is the [passive] image and man is [active] bearer of the look; she as sexual object is the ‘leitmotif of erotic spectacle.’” Both the British theater critics in *Miss Bretherton* and the German musicians in *Robert Elsmere* admit that they cannot take seriously as an artist a woman who is also beautiful. Mesmerized admirers cannot separate the dancer from the dance, and the Medusa’s power is not only her artistic giftedness, but also, preeminently, her sexuality.

On the other hand, the works of the visual artist and that of the novelist are not performance but artifact—the painting in the gallery, the book on the shelf. Thus Ward turns in the case of Elise Delaunay, the Parisian painter in *The History of David Grieve*, to an artist more like herself and the Brontës in that sexual desirability as perceived by the gaze counts for nothing. Her passion and power therefore need not incapacitate men. Presumably she can be every bit as “plain” and “tender” (*WR* I, 33) as Charlotte Brontë or “pure mind and passion” (“Introduction” to *Wuthering Heights*, xxiv) like Emily and still be equally powerful and passionate in art. Yet this is not the case with the siren Elise Delaunay, whose sexuality as Salome/Medusa is very much at issue in her creative life.

David Grieve is a working-class orphan, a young bookseller from the north of England, who by his ingenuity and ambition has done well. To investigate international business possibilities, to treat himself to a vacation, and to trace his roots (his mother having been French), Grieve takes his sister Louise on a pilgrimage to Paris. In the third section of *David Grieve*, which Ward titles “Storm and Stress,” David meets and loves Elise, and forms a liaison that very nearly destroys him and does, indirectly, contribute to the ruin of Louise. Peter Collister compares Ward’s protagonist to Hardy’s Jude Fawley (of *Jude the Obscure*), a better-known fictional character of the same decade, and if this is accurate, then Grieve’s dalliance with

Elise packs the combined threat of voluptuous Arabella and artistic Sue Bridehead (219–20).

That Elise is “a Bohemian” and “a *declassée*” and lives alone in Europe’s most cosmopolitan city sets her apart from the village maidens who have loved the “bourgeois” Englishman. She is at once androgynous and captivating. With her masculine voice and mannish airs of smoking cigarettes, she reminds Grieve of George Sand. Like Rose Leyburn, she has a fetish for clothing, especially shoes for her pretty feet. Of herself the painter says, “I am as vain as a peacock . . . I am jealous and proud and absurd” (II, 57; II, 25). When Grieve encounters Elise, she is also what Rose would have become had she continued to polish a cosmopolitan sophistication, continued to frequent the salons, rehearsal spaces, and music halls of male musicians (as Elise frequents the studios, ateliers, galleries, and clubs of artistic Paris). In removing her into the domestic space of marriage, Ward saves Rose from both artistry and androgyny.

Elise is also a “very siren of provocation and wild charm,” a Medusa who freezes the man who loves her, and a Salome who decapitates him. Early in the novel Grieve meets the celebrated painter Henri Regnault and views Regnault’s sizzling painting *Salome* that is the toast of the artistic season in Paris (the painting that Oscar Wilde, who created his own version of Salome for the stage, considered an insolent gypsy girl). David has nightmares about the painting—although Regnault’s Salome is a strong brunette, he observes, and his Elise a delicate blonde. Thus, in Freudian terms, David unconsciously fears the decapitating, emasculating Elise. As well he should. Nevertheless he is “dazzled,” “intoxicated” by her voice, her “siren’s face,” her “ravishing” foot modeled for Dalon’s Siren, her profusion of blonde curls (II, 111; II, 41; II, 21; II, 5; II, 16).

But Elise vows to be a wild bird, not one caged by some man, and she is liberated from the constraints of reputation, femininity, and middle-class respectability that young Grieve understands. She openly acknowledges that she is egocentric and selfish, saying, “I am incorrigible. I am an artist. I mean to live by myself and work for myself.” Her watchword in all things is “freedom,” and her art is her “way out,” freeing her from conventional domesticity and female spaces. She proclaims, “That woman that has art is free and she alone,” (II, 26; II, 116), that only the female artist has scaled the man’s heaven and, like Prometheus, stolen the sacred fire (Prometheus’s theft serving as reference for women’s art dating at least from Madame de Staël’s *Corinne*).

As for Grieve, he has been metamorphosed into stone; he has eaten the Lotus fruit; he is “paralyzed,” “tongue-tied,” and—we are

repeatedly told—"intoxicated." In his dalliance with his French Circe, he abandons his business to an apprentice, and his sister to seduction by an accomplished rake. Grieve wants to marry Elise, but she accepts only "l'union libre" and consents to spend a month with him at Fontainebleau. There the Siren figuratively castrates her lover, metamorphosing him into female. In a strange gender reversal he becomes the muse who poses as she paints him; he serves as her nurse, who is tender and "motherly" with her injured ankle; he is "a mere slave at her [pretty] feet" and she is the master (in the double sense of mastery of her art and of her slave/concubine David) (II, 112; II, 19; II, 114; II, 146; II, 154). When she fears her art is being damaged by love, she simply walks out on her muse/model. Grieve is bereft; he attempts suicide, curses Elise's art, then slowly mends and returns to England where—his French Sturm und Drang period transcended—he is renewed to his shopkeeping English self, to love and vitality.

In the case of Elise Delaunay, Ward seems to have followed James's recommendation to avoid disposing of a fascinating female artist in a conventional marriage. Neither a rich older man (such as Flaxman) nor a learned older man like (such as Kendal) could tame, "scold," or "crush" Elise. While both these men are more sophisticated, worldly, and masterful than their respective female artists Rose and Isabel, Grieve is considerably less so. And Elise is more determined to live for art, yet at great expense. Her "insatiable vanity" and "reckless ambition," as well as her vulgarity and selfishness, exact a heavy toll. This Salome/Medusa not only mesmerizes and castrates Grieve but also mutilates her spiritual self. Elise understands her womanly nature and female desires, but she willfully sacrifices her womanliness for artistic freedom. She recognizes that woman's biology makes her man's victim (a tirade she pours on Grieve when they witness a young mother burdened with children and a too-quickly-faded youth and beauty). She angrily accuses David of attempting to kill both her youth and her art; when she has "used" him for a sexual escapade that she later fears has distracted her from her work and allowed another female artist to receive critical acclaim that should belong to herself, she exercises her avowed right of freedom and is swallowed up in the streets of Paris.

Unaccountably, when an older David Grieve meets Elise in Paris some years later, she has married the "cousin" who aided her escape from her passionate interlude with David and who is now a "cripple." Thwarted in her drive for fame, Elise supports her husband, paints so there will be soup in the pot, and is "no longer an artist but an artisan" (II, 112). As she has done with Rose, Ward writes Elise out of the text—the difference being that we witness Rose's capitulation to domestic love and it happens soon after the Langham period, while

Elise's marriage takes place somewhere in the margins of Ward's text and apparently some time after she abandons Grieve. We are not permitted to witness the strangulation of Elise's art; we only learn that it has died. As she had done with Isabel Bretherton and Rose Leyburn, Ward in her third novel has created a powerful female artist, albeit one who is more selfish and narcissistic than either Isabel or Rose. Significantly Ward permits her other artists, the actress and the violinist, to find happiness when they abandon their art for domesticity, while she creates in Elise a creature so jealous and self-centered that she is incapable of bringing joy to herself or to the man who loves her in vain.

In the feminist view of woman-as-artist, a creative woman is not impelled to kill off or out-trope the artist/mother. But she does steal and adapt patriarchal myth that therefore becomes a potential source of her own authority and power. Mary Augusta Ward, who wrote 25 novels, was serious about her writing career and also about the issues of female creativity (as evidenced by her thoughtful commentary on the Brontës), but she was also a traditional wife and mother who refused to validate a female artist creating her artistic life outside the domestic sphere. (One could hardly cite the Brontë sisters as exceptions to Ward's tenet because, although they were unmarried, their art flourished in their father's domestic space in the parsonage at Haworth.) It is a significant fact that as Mrs. Humphry Ward, she placed her husband's given name, not her own, on the cover of her novels. Her squeamishness about the freedom and independence of female artists causes her to marry off her female artists, whether or not the marriage seems coherently motivated or convincing. Through Isabel Bretherton, Rose Leyburn, and especially Elise Delaunay, Ward posits that women who live for art alone run the risk of damaging not only others, but also their own souls. Ward's memorable women artists—her variations of Medusa as Vivien, Undine, Circe, and Salome—are achieved by the novelist's boldly laying claim to the myth of the Signifier (in this case, the Medusa myth), but her reservations about unleashing the full power of her Medusa-as-artist contribute to Ward's own temerity as artist.

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CHAPTER 7



RE-VISIONING THE “VISION FROM A FAIRER WORLD THAN HIS”: WOMEN, CREATIVITY, AND WORK IN EAST LYNNE AND MRS. DOUBTFIRE

Karen M. Odden

In recent years, there has been a spate of novels that re-vision earlier novels. *The Wind Done Gone* (2001) by Alice Randall, which tells the story of Scarlett O’Hara’s mulatto half-sister, has been the subject of publishing controversy; *Lo’s Diary* (1999) by Pia Pera tells Lolita’s story from her own perspective; Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs* (1997) rewrites Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1860–61); Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Holder of the World* (1993) loosely rewrites Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868); Maurice Condé’s *Windward Heights* transports *Wuthering Heights* to Cuba and Guadeloupe at the turn of the century; and Lin Haire-Sargeant’s *Heathcliff; The Return to Wuthering Heights* (1993) provides Heathcliff’s story during his disappearance (cf. Gopnik, 37–8). They follow in the path of Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which famously responded to *Jane Eyre* (1847). All of these later works tend to retell the events in the earlier novel through a different protagonist—for example, *Wide Sargasso Sea* presents the story of Antoinette/Bertha Mason from her perspective; in the original, Rochester presents Bertha’s story to Jane Eyre in an embedded narrative. I call this form of retelling “re-visioning” in order to emphasize that it re-envisions a series of

events and accomplishes it through a change in *vision*—a change in point of view. The re-vision enables us to hear the stories of characters left out of narratives—because they have been banished to the attic or simply silenced—and creates the opportunity for wholly new plots. These plots often potentially sensitize us to the effects of disenfranchisement based on class, gender, or race.

When I first read Ellen Wood's 1861 sensation novel *East Lynne*, I thought I had found another pairing, for I immediately recognized its similarities with Chris Columbus's 1993 film *Mrs. Doubtfire*. Curious about the film, I then read Anne Fine's novel *Madame Doubtfire* (1988; republished as *Alias Madame Doubtfire* in the United States), upon which the film was based. After closer examination of all three, however, I realized that the film *Mrs. Doubtfire*, Fine's novel, and *East Lynne* deviate from the pattern. Unlike many of the "re-visioning novels," key aspects of the main plot are preserved almost intact from *East Lynne* to *Mrs. Doubtfire*. Further, in many ways, the film bears a closer resemblance to *East Lynne* than to Fine's novel, the source for the film. (For example, the film opens with the "Pudgie" scene, in which Daniel appears as a responsible voiceover artist; Fine's novel opens with him sourly deriding Miranda. The film's presentation of a man sitting in a studio, a work space, more closely parallels the opening of *East Lynne*, in which the heroine's father sits in his library, where he discusses business with an attorney.)

The stronger similarities between the Victorian novel and the American film led me to focus on these two and suggested two ideas: first, that *East Lynne* was perhaps more visually oriented than Fine's novel; and second, that the film *Mrs. Doubtfire* was more Victorian in its sensibilities and concerns than I first recognized. Given the strong similarities between the plots of *East Lynne* and *Mrs. Doubtfire*, did re-visioning still take place at all? I would say that it does, but differently. The film crosses genre from the Victorian novel, of course, replacing the author's mind's eye with the camera lens. More importantly, a re-vision occurs *within* each work. The protagonists of both *East Lynne* and *Mrs. Doubtfire*—Isabel Vane and Daniel Hillard—are enabled to re-vision their lives from the perspective of another class or gender. There are some salient differences in story between *East Lynne* and *Mrs. Doubtfire*, of course, not the least of which is that one is set in Victorian England and the other in contemporary America. In both works, however, a household is broken apart by divorce. As a step toward understanding the value of this divorce plot for the two cultures, it is important to consider the historical contexts to which the works responded. In 1857, British parliament passed the Divorce Act,

which revolutionized divorce for the Victorians. In the years following 1857, it was feared that this law would at the very least shift the balance of power in the middle-class Victorian home and might even encourage women to abandon their families.

Published four years after the act, *East Lynne* registers this cultural concern. I suggest the story was popular in part because it potentially soothed the cultural anxiety roused by the Divorce Act. In having a woman return of her own desire to the home, repent, and then die for her transgression, this plot works to conserve the traditional positions of men and women in the household (a woman asking for a divorce was more acceptable and financially attainable in 1990s America). In each work, the lost parent returns in disguise, with the help of glasses, a costume, and either makeup or a veil, as a British governess or nanny who epitomizes the British Empire in her attitudes (Wicke, 370). In each, the care-taker forges affective bonds with three children, particularly with the older opposite-sex child, that resemble those of a parent. In each, there is a disparity in earning power between the two parents; and the woman's employment complicates her relationship with her children. The female protagonists in both the novel and film fall in love with men other than their husbands.

What interests me is not whether Anne Fine read *East Lynne* (her publisher informed me that she did not), or whether Chris Columbus did. Rather, I am curious about why this plot was marshaled for, and extraordinarily popular in, cultures on opposite sides of the Atlantic 130 years apart. Indeed, the extraordinary popularity of all three works, and particularly the film and *East Lynne*, suggests that the plot device of having an economically compromised parent return as a British governess to three children, the eldest of whom is the opposite sex of the gender-bending parent, responds in a powerful way to a cluster of cultural anxieties about women, desire, paid work, and families. I would say that in spite of very different conditions for the real men and women in Victorian England and 1990s America, the Victorian novel and the American film perform a similar kind of ideological work—work that serves imaginatively to stabilize the family at the cost of feminine creativity (cf. Kaplan, Dever, Cvetkovich). I believe this ideological work was necessary in both 1860s England and 1990s America because in both cultures, gender roles were changing substantially due to legal and economic factors.

Acknowledging the central plot elements that are obviously common to both texts enables us to bracket these, at least temporarily, and focus instead on some of their more subtle aspects—particularly the subplots and formal elements such as focalization and embedded

narratives. When I set aside the similarities between Isabel's and Daniel's plots and reexamined the idea that *East Lynne* might be a visually oriented text, I was struck by the concern with women's creativity in both works; with the ways feminine creativity intersects with subjectivity and domesticity; and with the ways vision is an important device for staging these aspects of the female characters' experiences. These motifs are perhaps most obvious in the film. Although Robin Williams has the opportunity to exercise his creativity by playing with his gender in *Mrs. Doubtfire*, his wife Miranda's plot is a story *about* creativity. She is a talented partner at a design firm who attempts to balance her needs for professional success and for romantic and familial love—all of which seem to be increasingly at odds with her creative work.

When I reread *East Lynne* after seeing the film, I began to consider the ways that Isabel's creativity is staged and what this might have to do with Wood's particular and personal circumstances. After reading *East Lynne*, Harriet Martineau wrote, "I do not care how many murders or other crimes form the foundation of its plots if they are to give us such stories as this. I wish I possessed a hundredth of the author's imagination" (qtd. in "Introduction" to *East Lynne*, 20). This quote is suggestive because to some extent, Isabel's unnamed "other crime," which leads to her social marginalization, is not only a product of Wood's fertile "imagination." It is also a mark of the unspoken social liminality that both enabled the work of Wood's imagination and was entailed by it. Ellen Wood left England in the 1830s and returned two decades later, after her husband's business had failed; she began writing to ameliorate the financial crisis that placed her family in a precarious socioeconomic position. In her case, her situation demanded that she perform creative work; but her creative work also created a peculiar social position for her, as it did for other women novelists. In the 1860s, the number of women writers began to overtake the number of male authors, particularly with the growing audience of women readers who devoured books by Wood, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Charlotte Yonge, and other women writers who were popular in Mudie's and other circulating libraries. Wood recognized the potential of the writing marketplace as a site where she and other women could not only exercise their creativity but also be paid for it—earning, as Braddon described it in the pages of *Belgravia*, both an honest living and public recognition for her creativity (Hughes, 106–36; Wolff, 148–221; Robinson, 112). The success of these women writers may be marked by sales and adaptations of their work for the stage and film. For example, upon original

publication, *East Lynne* was a runaway bestseller, selling over 500,000 copies, and it was turned into numerous plays and movies by 1920 (Kaplan, 91–5). But these women met with censure and resistance, particularly from those critics who objected to the sensation novel. Contemporary reviewers labeled the genre poisonous and immoral and suggested that women who wrote them knew too much about crime for their own good (cf. Mansel, Oliphant).

Through Isabel, Wood explores the ways that social marginalization both contributes to the conditions that enable a woman to work creatively and results from a woman trying to resist conventions and live differently. Despite some conservative moralizing passages in which the narrator urges women to “bear” whatever they must as a wife, Wood uses a series of episodes in which Isabel is shown being creative to reflect upon the self-actualization and personal fulfillment that creative work and imaginative rebellion permits. She anticipates some of the ideas outlined in Virginia Woolf’s famous essay *A Room of One’s Own*: women need financial independence, privacy for self-reflection, and intellectual freedom in order to develop their selves and to create. In having Isabel re-vision and re-create her life, Wood suggests that a woman’s creative work—whether piano playing, letter writing, or, by extension to the author herself, novel writing—can potentially transform the way women conceive of themselves and act within their world.

In exploring the relationships between women and creativity in *East Lynne* and *Mrs. Doubtfire*, visibility emerges as both a thematic and formal concern. Who gazes upon whom and how they are perceived raises questions about gender and the assumptions that underpin gender roles at the level of theme. The formal elements of disguise, focalization, and mirroring, however, through which the relationships between gender and creativity are articulated, are specifically visual. In the following sections, I describe the way formal elements that emphasize visibility interface with themes of gender and creativity. In the first section, I discuss the act of re-visioning itself and suggest the ways that both *East Lynne* and *Mrs. Doubtfire* use the device of disguise in order to produce the conditions of possibility for creativity, as discussed by creativity theorists. In the second section, I compare the film and the novel across the formal element of focalization in order to suggest that ways of conceiving women and creative work underpin strategies of masculine and feminine representation. In the third section, I consider the embedded narratives, focalized through disguised characters, in order to explore ways that disguise enables a rethinking of women and desire; and in the fourth section, I consider

the device of mirroring and the way it enables evolving ideas about marriage. Finally, I suggest the ways disguise within a given work seems to work as a trope that motivates revision outside the work.

I. DISGUISE AND CREATIVITY

One thing made clear by juxtaposing *East Lynne* and *Mrs. Doubtfire* is that disguise is a crucial element of the plot, and there is a complex relationship between disguised identity and creativity in each narrative. In these two works, disguise helps to produce a condition that creativity theorists have suggested is important to fostering creativity: freedom from external evaluation. Carl R. Rogers states,

For the individual to find himself in an atmosphere where he is not being evaluated, not being measured by some external standard is enormously freeing. Evaluation is always a threat, always creates a need for defensiveness, always means that some portion of experience must be denied to awareness. . . . But if judgments based on external standards are not being made then I can be more open to my experience, can recognize my own likings and dislikings, the nature of the materials and of my reaction to them, more sharply and more sensitively. I can begin to recognize the locus of evaluation within myself.

(303)

When Isabel returns to East Lynne and Daniel returns to his home in disguise, they enjoy a certain freedom from evaluation based on middle-class Victorian standards of femininity in the case of Isabel/Madame Vine and American standards of masculinity in the case of Daniel/Mrs. Doubtfire. Both Isabel/Madame Vine and Daniel/Mrs. Doubtfire are marginal characters in that they are at once part of the household and not blood relatives. They are also visually eccentric, and this aspect of disguise permits other characters to accept a certain amount of eccentricity in their behavior.

These characters who take on disguises *em-body* a process that William J. J. Gordon outlines in his essay "Metaphor and Invention." Gordon suggests that creativity depends fundamentally upon two processes: innovation and learning. Innovation depends upon "making the familiar strange," and learning about a new problem requires "making the strange familiar." These are both aspects of metaphorical thinking. In Gordon's examples, William Harvey used the concept of the pump to refute the existing notion that circulation proceeded through ebb and flow—that is, he made the familiar strange. A teacher explains circulation to a student by using the example of a

swimming pool pump to conceptualize the working of a fish's heart making the strange familiar; then the student draws from his familiar experience to understand that the lungs and liver act as "filters" when they cleanse the blood. Thus, the student uses a familiar concept creatively to enhance his own knowledge (252). *In disguise*, Isabel and Daniel are metaphoric, or rather, like similes: Isabel appears *as* a governess; Daniel appears *as* a woman nanny. Because of their disguises, Isabel and Daniel, as strangers, slowly become part of the family—that is, familiar; but because they were once family, they also make the familiar strange.

I turn now to an essay by Adrienne Rich. It was written in the early days of the feminist movement and may seem dated, but I use it because it usefully links together these two concepts of creativity—freedom and metaphorical thinking—with the act of re-vision, women's creative work, and sexual identity. Rich writes:

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us [women] more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see—and therefore live—afresh. . . . For writers, and at this moment for women writers in particular, there is the challenge and promise of a whole new psychic geography to be explored. But there is also a difficult and dangerous walking on the ice, as we try to find language and images for a consciousness we are just coming into, and with little in the past to support us. . . . For a poem to coalesce . . . there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive. And a certain freedom of the mind is needed—freedom to press on, . . . nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name. For writing is re-naming. . . . But to be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way is in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination.

(90-1)

I have quoted Rich at length because her essay reflects and develops ideas put forth by the creativity theorists. This passage emphasizes the importance of "freedom" to creativity and the way that a

“transformation of reality” is part of imaginative work. Rich sees re-visioning—here she means not only re-seeing old texts but creating new ones—as being intimately linked with a woman’s intellectual freedom, her imagination, and her ability to live nontraditionally. In *East Lynne* and *Mrs. Doubtfire*, the device of disguise is central to the project of creating a new vision because it is a way of “re-naming”—of making Daniel into Mrs. Doubtfire, of making Isabel Vane into Madame Vine, and of making the familiar strange. It enables Daniel and Isabel to go back and re-do their life, and to re-see it from another perspective. Rich suggests that when a woman has the freedom and agency to produce “an imaginative transformation of reality” through a process of re-naming, there can be a profound epistemological change. In the next two sections, I explore the extent to which *East Lynne* and *Mrs. Doubtfire* achieve and resist this profound change.

II. WOMEN, CREATIVITY, WORK, AND DESIRE

The film *Mrs. Doubtfire* enables us to re-view *East Lynne* with fresh eyes because it sensitizes us to gendered spectatorship and the way it suggests the relationships among women’s subjectivity, her creativity, and her availability as an object for a male artist. Drawing on the work of film theorists such as Mary Ann Doane and Laura Mulvey, critics such as Elaine Showalter, Frank Tomasulo, and Adrienne Munich have pointed out the implications of the 1982 film *Tootsie*, which is thematically feminist but employs the Hollywood tradition of the male-oriented perspective. Similarly, the camera’s gaze is gendered male in *Mrs. Doubtfire*, even (or perhaps especially) for scenes that represent Miranda as a professional woman. The first time we see Miranda at work, it is through the eyes of her boss, Justin. He tells her that a potential client and former love interest, Stu Dunmire, played by Pierce Brosnan, is interested in having Miranda help him restore a mansion. In the next work scene, Stu is brought to Miranda’s office by Justin. Miranda and Stu’s meeting is framed strangely. The first shot shows a “picture perfect” china cup, a domestic object held by Miranda’s disembodied hand. The camera pulls back to show Miranda holding the cup, then pulls back again to show Miranda in her office. In this way, her domestic identity is given priority over her professional identity. Then the camera shows the two men coming in from the hall, and we see a reverse shot of Miranda, from their point of view, sitting and wearing a cappuccino froth moustache. She stands, to meet the men at their level, and Stu pointedly suggests that she remove the moustache

as Justin looks away. She shamefacedly wipes off the moustache; Stu rewards Miranda with a smile. It is a highly suggestive moment, in which both the camera's eye and the men's gestures reflect whose "world" it is. When we first see Stu in the work environment, he is poised, capable, and a desired client; the script describes him as "tall and handsome, smacking of confidence, money and charm" (*MD*, 19). Miranda, on the other hand, is seen appropriating the male moustache, looking silly doing so, and being corrected by Stu. She loses her professional poise, "nearly spill[s] her cappuccino," and lapses into a voice that the script calls "girlish" (*MD*, 19–20). The camera remains on Miranda, approximating the two men's point of view, underpinning the authority of men in the workplace while Miranda struggles to secure her image as a capable interior designer.

This is only one of the ways Miranda's creativity is depreciated by the film. The film also suggests that Miranda's desire for creative fulfillment is only a mask that conceals and facilitates her sexual desire. Miranda's involvement with Stu, who is an old flame, evolves as a result of her professional career. Conversely, in the scene following the cappuccino moustache episode, Miranda takes Stu to the conference room to show him some designs for his new office, and he makes it clear that he is only interested in talking about her personal life:

MIRANDA: As you probably know, the estate was built in 1876.

These sketches reflect your desire to have it completely restored, re-made into the stately, sumptuous inn it once was.

STU: You look better than ever.

MIRANDA: . . . a tufted sofa. A Flemish tapestry. A brass-bound Regency style table . . .

STU: I'd love to get re-acquainted. Catch up. . . . Can we talk over dinner? (21–22)

The scene ends when "Stu . . . exits. Miranda stares after him, an interested smile plays on her lips."

(*MD*, 23)

The gendered gaze and the depreciation of women's creative work in this film caused me to reexamine *East Lynne*, particularly the chapter in which Isabel is introduced. Although it was written by a woman, the novel sustains a mode of presenting the male and female characters that is uncannily close to *Mrs. Doubtfire*. In the first chapter the narrator describes Isabel's father, the Earl, and the lawyer who will soon marry Isabel, Archibald Carlyle, in complete sentences, using their formal names and ascribing their physical attributes to them. The novel opens: "In an easy chair of the spacious and handsome

library of his town-house sat William, Earl of Mount Severn. His hair was grey, [and] the smoothness of his expansive brow was defaced by premature wrinkles" (41). The servant introduces "Mr. Carlyle" into the library and the narrator describes him in terms that could also describe a slightly younger Pierce Brosnan: "He was a very tall man of seven-and twenty, of remarkably noble presence. . . . His features were good, his complexion was pale and clear, his hair dark" (*EL*, 3). Carlyle wants to buy East Lynne from the Earl, but the profligate Earl wants it to be done secretly—"under the rose"—or all the money he makes from the sale will be seized by his creditors. The two men sit in the library to discuss the transfer of the East Lynne estate and then make their way together down the hall to meet Isabel.

The narrator introduces Isabel very differently. Isabel is described from the perspective of Archibald Carlyle, not an external narrator, in a sentence fragment. Her physical features are not attributed to "her," and Carlyle describes her in metaphors, as if she were always standing in for something else: "As he and Mr. Carlyle entered it at one door, someone else came in by the opposite one. Who—what—was it? Mr. Carlyle looked, not quite sure whether it was a human being: he almost thought it more like an angel. A light, graceful *girlish* form, a face of surpassing beauty, beauty that is rarely *seen*, save *from the imagination of a painter*. . . . Altogether the vision did indeed look to the lawyer as one from a fairer world than *his*" (*EL*, 9, my emphasis). Focalizing the narration through the Earl and Carlyle, the men whose "town-house" and whose "world" it is, and the imaginary painter who would represent her beauty reflects the men's conception of Isabel's position as an object to be transferred between the men like the property, East Lynne, and as a cipher, available for the projection of a creative man's desiring imagination.

There is resistance to this narrative that constructs Isabel as a "vision," however, and it takes place in the domain of Isabel's creative oral/aural outlet: her piano playing and singing. These are conventional skills for Victorian women, of course; but the changes in Isabel's playing and singing throughout the novel are important. After Carlyle has bought East Lynne, the Earl and Isabel remain because the Earl is too ill with gout to move. One evening, Carlyle visits with the Earl and Isabel at East Lynne. The men are in the dining room, and Isabel leaves them to go sit at her piano, where she plays for herself alone:

The conversation of the earl and Mr. Carlyle had been one of the eager bustling world, of money getting and money spending, money owing

and money paying, and that sacred chant broke in upon them with some strange contrast, soothing the ear, but reproving the heart. "It is Isabel," explained the earl. "Her singing carries a singular charm with it. . . . The instrument is placed against the wall, and the partition is thin," remarked the Earl. "Isabel little thinks she is entertaining us as well as herself." Indeed she did not. She sang chant after chant.

(*EL*, 110–111)

Although the Earl's phrase suggests that he perceives Isabel as an object that produces pleasure (whether aural or visual) for men, Isabel plays for her own aural enjoyment, and she is no longer a "vision" but a voice. Later, she wants her piano tuned; and after meeting Mr. Kane, the pianist and tuner, she patronizes his local concert. Little does she know, however, that the piano she wants tuned is now Carlyle's—a fact of which the narrator reminds us, as the men smile at each other. Soon we learn that the money she has used to buy tickets for Mr. Kane's concert has come from the sale of the property and was recently Carlyle's money. This moment reflects the way that for Isabel, her ability to exercise and enjoy her own creativity depends upon money, and specifically, the money belonging to her future husband, as she has no inheritance of her own. Isabel's status as a vision, and her inability to exercise her creativity by playing a piano, becomes clear shortly after, when she attends the concert. Before she leaves the house, she stops in to see her father, and she is described from Lord Mount Severn's point of view: "A *vision* was standing before him, a beauteous queen, a gleaming fairy; he hardly knew *what* she looked like" (*EL*, 119, my emphasis); later, when she arrives at the concert hall, "the same dazzling vision which had burst on the sight of Lord Mount Severn fell on that of the audience, in Isabel, with her . . . wondrous beauty" (*EL*, 122). The audience looks at her not because she plays at the piano concert—a feat that her skill would enable her to do, though her social position prohibits it—but because she is a cipher—a "what"—available for their visual pleasure.

When the Earl dies, Isabel is left utterly penniless. Desperate to find refuge from a cruel relative who hates her and subjects her to physical abuse, she marries Carlyle and returns to East Lynne. But the marriage that Wood depicts is excruciating in its boredom; domesticity is stultifying and leads Isabel to produce morbid imaginings about her husband having an affair with the neighbor, Barbara Hare. Bored almost to illness, she even plays the piano listlessly. When Archibald asks her how she spends her day, she replies, "Oh, I hardly know. . . . Trying the new piano, and looking at my watch, wishing the time would go more quickly, that you might come home" (*EL*, 198). When Barbara visits

East Lynne soon after the marriage, she asks Miss Carlyle, “‘How does she [Isabel] employ her time?’ ‘In doing nothing,’” snappishly retorted Miss Carlyle. ‘Sings a bit, and plays a bit, and reads a bit, and receives her visitors, and idles away her days in that manner’” (*EL*, 207–8). Early in their marriage, the relationship between creative work, economics, and desire becomes emblemized in a short scene. Lady Isabel plays some songs on the piano for her husband. Finally, she exclaims, “‘There, Archibald! I am sure I have sung you ten songs at least. . . . You ought to pay me for them.’ He did pay her; holding the dear face to him, and taking from it impassioned kisses” (*EL*, 209). In a bizarre reversal, he pretends to pay her for her creative work, but the domestic space renders a fair economy void: he “takes” kisses from her instead, as if her creative work created a debt. Shortly after, Lady Isabel admits that she feels “very tired” but “[t]here’s nothing to do.” The busy middle-class Miss Cornelia urges Isabel to perform desultory tasks: “‘I make table napkins!’ exclaimed Lady Isabel. ‘I don’t understand that kind of work’” (*EL*, 218). Isabel’s plot and her creative work come to a standstill, and it is only through her desire that it begins again.

III. DESIRE, ESCAPE, DISGUISE

In both *East Lynne* and *Mrs. Doubtfire*, a woman’s desire for something other than a respectable bourgeois marriage is represented as the problem. Significantly, most of the different forms of desire—to leave the home, to have a sexual liaison, to have a fulfilling career, to return to the home—are all represented through the device of the embedded narrative. I use this term to describe any segment of narrative during which a character’s motive or identity changes in such a way that she has a different relationship to the primary plot when she reappears in it. Often, this short episode is “embedded” into the narrative as a “meanwhile” episode, so that the reader or viewer understands the motivation of the character and her behavior does not seem a radical departure from previous actions (Bal, 54). The embedded narratives are important, for they separate patriarchal ideology and feminine desire at the level of form. That is, the embedded narratives, focalized through feminine characters, are *formal* points of resistance to the pattern of focalizing through male characters; this tension between the embedded narrative and male focalization reflects the way feminine desire resists assimilation to patriarchal notions about women.

In *East Lynne*, Isabel's desire to leave the home is multiply determined: it derives in part from her jealousy over what she believes to be her husband's love for Barbara Hare; in part from her misery at home because Miss Cornelia tyrannizes her; and in part from her sexual desire for Francis Levison. When he is near, she cannot control her "vivid blush," and when she thinks of him "a thrill quicken[s] her veins" (*EL*, 58, 109). In the embedded narrative in chapter 21, "Francis Levison," Lady Isabel visits Boulogne for her health while the rest of her family remains at East Lynne. There, she spends days with Francis Levison, who has fled England because of his debts. She is physically and psychologically transformed from illness to health not because of the sea air but because "all the fresh emotions of her youth had come again" as a result of being with Levison (*EL*, 258). Later, the unwitting Carlyle invites Levison to stay at East Lynne, where Levinson insinuates to Isabel that her husband is having an affair with Barbara Hare. Tormented by jealousy and seduced by Levison's promises of adoration, Isabel flees with Levison to the Continent, where she becomes pregnant with his child.

Rather than focusing on why Isabel leaves (a question that the narrative leaves unresolved), I suggest we focus on *the way* she leaves. She literally writes herself into a new story. On the night Isabel plans to desert her family and her life of bourgeois boredom, she pens the first of two letters she writes in the course of the novel. Her husband comes in to her room and she twice ignores him to go on with her "writing" (*EL*, 327). Later that night, as Carlyle searches for Isabel, the maid, Joyce, hands Carlyle the letter: "It is my lady's writing." When Carlyle opens the envelope he reads, "When years go on, and my children ask where their mother is, and why she left them, tell them that you, their father, goaded her to it. If they inquire *what* she is, tell them also, if so you will. But tell them at the same time that you outraged and betrayed her, driving her to the very depth of desperation, ere she quitted them in her despair" (*EL*, 332). This moment depicts a woman writing to an audience comprised of both Archibald—the stalwart representative of middle-class patriarchy—and her readers. I interpret this as our cue to read this novel in part as a discourse about women novelists and the problems they faced as they simultaneously tried to be "proper ladies" within a middle-class patriarchal system and to represent the ways that system potentially stifled their creative self-fulfillment (cf. Poovey).

In the subsequent chapters, entitled "Never to Be Redeemed" and "Charming Results," the narrator makes it clear that by leaving East Lynne, Isabel has made a "step [that] was irrevocable" (*EL*, 335).

When her relative the Lord Mount Severn comes to visit her in her rooms, she asks him, "What does the world say of me?" he responds, "Just what you may have said in the days now over, at any who had gone the way that you have done." Isabel contemplates herself after he leaves: "Alone: alone! *Alone* for evermore" (*EL*, 362–63). This solitude is narratively important, for when she returns to East Lynne, it is as a result of the embedded narratives in chapters 31 and 33, in which she has considered her desires privately. In chapter 31, she throws Levi-son out of her rooms, and even orders her attendant "into an adjoining room," so she has a room all to herself (*EL*, 348). She sits by the fire and contemplates her life, with a growing sense of self-knowledge. The narrator explains, "Her recent and depressing illness . . . the terrible position in which she found herself, had brought to Lady Isabel *reflection*. Not the reflection, so called, that may come to us who yet live in and for the world, but that which must, almost of necessity, attend one whose part in the world is over, who has no interest left between this and the next" (350). Although this passage suggests that her "part in the world is over," it is not; but the phrase "no interest" implies the sense of freedom that develops when Isabel believes the world no longer watches her movements with avid interest. As she muses further, in the privacy of her room, her very language changes, reflecting her growing sense that she has shaped her own life and she can shape her own life again: "*She* had lost Mr Carlyle and by her own act she had thrown him from her; and now she must make the best of her work. . . . That night, for the first time, a momentary vision floated before her mind's eye; a far, far off, indistinct *vision* of the shame and remorse and sorrow of her breaking heart giving place to something like peace" (350–351, my emphasis). Isabel uses the rhetoric of self-flagellation, but she also makes a claim to her own power. The italicized pronoun "*She*" replaces Carlyle's "*Who—what—was it?*" in chapter 1 and the "*what*" in her letter to Carlyle. Isabel is now capable of *having* a vision rather than *being* one.

In chapter 33, Isabel experiences the railway crash that kills her infant and leaves her disfigured. Isabel remains in a hospital on the brink of death for three months. Her adultery and her first letter secure her isolation; a railway crash and her second letter secure her change of identity that brings with it the freedom to act. After her railway crash, Isabel believes she is dying and addresses another letter, this time to her relative the Lord Mount Severn, her stand-in "father," as he calls himself (*EL*, 361). She explains that she is dying and asks him to relay the information to Carlyle. Isabel does not die, and the letter is sent in error; but this letter enables Isabel to re-create her life as a

feme sole, neither wife nor daughter. The world believes she is dead, and Isabel changes her identity to keep it that way:

She was not travelling under her own name; she left that behind her when she left Grenoble . . . Lady Isabel understood . . . that the despatching of her letter had been the foundation for the misapprehension; and she began to ask herself now, why she should undeceive Lord Mount Severn and the world. She longed, none knew with what intense longing, to be unknown, obscure, unrecognized by all: none can know it, until they have placed a barrier between themselves and the world as she had done.

(*EL*, 380)

Thus the act of writing guarantees first her solitude, in which she can contemplate her self, and then her freedom to re-create her life. An acquaintance offers to recommend her to the position of governess at East Lynne, and she discovers her "desperate longing" for her children (455). Isabel completes the transformation begun by the crash: she destroys "any scrap of paper, any mark on linen . . . which could give a clue to her former self," dons "blue spectacles," and "tie[s] up her throat [like] a man's collar and stock" (*EL*, 456, 467).

The train wreck enables Isabel to return *by her own choice* to East Lynne—not as a wife seeking refuge from evil relatives, but as an employed governess to her own children. She thereby undoes her former economic dependence and lack of "provisions" (*EL*, 47). Isabel's psychological agency parallels her economic agency, for when she returns to East Lynne, she repeatedly distinguishes between herself, as an agent who shapes her own life, and the estate, as an object that was transferred between her father and Carlyle. This continues the trend she began as she first began to reflect on her life in chapter 31. When Isabel (as Madame Vine) sees the doors and tables at East Lynne, she reflects, "She had put them from her by her own free act and deed" (*EL*, 458). Near the end of the novel, she reflects further on her life, returning to its scenes, and she claims agency, again using a feminine pronoun in italics:

A review of the past then rose up before her. . . . The old scenes passed through her mind, as the changing pictures in a phantasmagoria . . . [In] that first illness of hers [h]ow she had lain, and, in her unfounded jealousy, imagined Barbara the house's mistress. She, dead; Barbara exalted to her place, Mr. Carlyle's wife, her child's stepmother! . . . [It] had all come to pass. *She* had brought it forth. Not Mr. Carlyle; not Barbara; she alone. Oh, the dreadful misery of the retrospect!

(*EL*, 651–52, emphasis in the original)

Unhappy as this reflection is, it suggests a potent agency for Isabel. The narrative is focalized through Isabel, suggested by her ability to “re-view” the “old scenes.” I suggest that by pairing psychological agency and economic agency across the railway crash which enabled her disguise, the novel represents the importance of both the freedom from outside observation and the autonomy that disguise enables. I do not mean to suggest that this novel wholeheartedly endorses Isabel’s behavior, for once she returns to East Lynne, Isabel undergoes the humiliating experience of watching her husband love his second wife; certainly her death at the end is extreme punishment. But the psychological freedom that anonymity creates enables Isabel to realize—that is, both to recognize and fulfill—her own desires for self-actualization and for her children through her work far better than she could when she was a middle-class wife and mother. The governess Isabel/Madame Vine earns a salary and has a room of her own—partly because governesses at East Lynne are respected (the narrator tells us), and partly because they are kept at a distance from the rest of the household. In other words, the governess Isabel/Madame Vine occupies a position very similar to that of Wood in the 1860s—part of society and yet liminal; part of a middle-class family and yet a worker. Significantly, the conditions that enable Isabel’s self-actualization and the fulfillment of her maternal desires include privacy and an income of her own. As Rosenman has noted, these are the conditions that six decades later Virginia Woolf would name as essential to a woman writer in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and *Professions for Women* (1942).

In *Mrs. Doubtfire*, feminine desire is a bit more complicated because desire is split between the two “women”: Miranda, who wants to break up the home, and Mrs. Doubtfire/Daniel, who wants to return to it. On the one hand, the movie vindicates Miranda by suggesting that her desire to divorce Daniel is justified. Miranda wants a divorce not because she feels sexually attracted to someone else, or because she is foolish enough to be jealous of a faithful husband, but because she is fed up with Daniel’s irresponsibility, which puts her in the position of always playing the “heavy”—the witchy disciplinarian mother (*MD*, 12). Early in the film the irrepressible Daniel throws a wild birthday party for his son with loud music and zoo animals; the house is wrecked and the neighbor calls the police. Miranda arrives on the scene furious and stops the party. We, like the neighbor and the police, see her point. Conversely, the movie opens with Daniel losing his voice-over job when he refuses to voice the words for the cartoon parakeet Pudgie because the bird is smoking, which Daniel feels is

a "morally irresponsible" message to send to children (*MD*, 1). In opening with the Pudge scene, the film suggests that Daniel would be a responsible father if only he did not have to work so hard to offset Miranda's witchiness, which he insists derives from her working long hours with "corporate cloneheads" (*MD*, 12). If only Miranda didn't want creative and professional fulfillment, the family would be a properly functional unit.

The desiring mother in the film does not evolve during an embedded narrative. Indeed, through the entire movie, Miranda has no embedded narrative, and she never becomes the intensely desiring parent that Daniel is from the beginning of the film. His desire reaches a crescendo, however, in an embedded narrative of nearly twenty minutes of scenes showing him scheming to get the nanny position: he impersonates a variety of evil nannies on the phone; then he goes through a make-over complete with two face masks; and he painfully dons false breasts, a wig, stockings, heels and other women's clothing. To emphasize Daniel's constant and appropriate paternal devotion to his children, the film effaces the transmutation of sexual desire into parental desire that *East Lynne* represents. In *Mrs. Doubtfire*, the oldest child is a girl, and the most tender moment of the film occurs between Daniel and Lydia outside the house late at night. Under the soft light from the street, Lydia runs after Daniel/Mrs. Doubtfire to apologize for being difficult and to thank her for making her mother happy. The sexual component of the relationship is literally masked—and erased—however, by Daniel's female disguise.

Mrs. Doubtfire stages a drama of loss and longing like that in *East Lynne*—but although the film has aspects of melodrama (including disguise, reconciliation, and reform), it is a comedy. Indeed, gendered desire creates the difference between the two genres: Isabel Vane does not purposefully remake her face in order to return home—she is in a railway crash that destroys her beautiful face and kills her baby (the sign of her sexual desire); only later, when she hears of the governess position, does she discover her proper maternal desire. Daniel, on the other hand, transforms himself into Mrs. Doubtfire with forethought and purpose. The process is comedic in part because of Robin Williams's extraordinary expressions; but it is also comedic because he *chooses* to refashion himself according to his desire, rather than being victimized and discovering his desire afterward.

Significantly, once he lives apart from Miranda, Daniel's nature evolves, and he becomes a responsible nurturer. As a reward, the movie grants him the role of Mrs. Doubtfire, the star of her own TV

show, and Daniel gets partial custody of his children. *East Lynne* is far more sadistic in its punishment of Isabel, for although she transforms her sexual desire into maternal desire, this is not enough to atone for her sin and she must die. As Isabel's economic position falls from aristocrat to middle-class wife to governess, her maternal instincts evolve, suggesting that women with less economic power and no sexual desire make better mothers. In *Mrs. Doubtfire*, Daniel becomes a woman part-time and demonstrates that he can have professional success *and* nurture his children better than his working ex-wife can. Both narratives position women who attempt to fulfill their own desires—whether sexual or professional—as failing to fulfill their primary maternal role.

IV. MIRRORING THE MARRIAGE: MAKING THE FAMILY STRANGE

Until now I have discussed the ways that the gendered gaze, focalization, and embedded narratives function. Analysis of these formal elements shows us how patriarchy depends upon focalizing feminine experience through the male gaze and how self-transformation “off stage” can reflect the tragic outcome of female desire and the comedic one of male desire. I want to discuss next another device that disguise allows. The film and the novel both attempt to articulate the way characters can re-envision themselves and change themselves through the device of mirroring. Disguise enables Isabel and Daniel to reflect upon themselves—in Rich's terms, to see with fresh eyes, to examine an old story from a new critical direction. I have suggested that the key similarity between the novel and film is that the lost parent returns in disguise. But we must also remember that the lost *spouse* returns in disguise. In both *East Lynne* and *Mrs. Doubtfire*, Isabel and Daniel listen to the old story of their marriages as told to them by other people, and this makes them new. It also models a way of knowing that Jessica Benjamin calls “intersubjectivity,” whose chief characteristic is that two subjectivities and two stories are held in tension together, rather than split into subject/object or self/other. After Isabel flees from East Lynne and leaves Levison, she takes a position as governess to a young woman named Helena. One day Isabel/Madame Vine is sitting on a bench in the park. Afy Hallijohn, formerly of West Lynne, approaches Isabel and tells her the story of Isabel's departure (*EL*, 449). (This is not quite so farfetched as it sounds; Afy's sister, Joyce, is a maid at East Lynne.) This is the first of five times Isabel hears her own story narrated back to her. She hears

it four times after she returns to East Lynne, from characters who are doubles for her: first from Barbara Hare, the new Mrs. Carlyle (*EL*, 463); then from her daughter Lucy (formerly called Isabel) (*EL*, 475); then from Barbara's mother, who, like Isabel, fears to order tea in her own house (*EL*, 487); and finally, with embellishments, from Barbara Hare again (*EL*, 553). Similarly, one day Daniel/Mrs. Doubtfire sits down to a cup of tea with Miranda. He asks what went wrong with her marriage, and Miranda tries to explain:

MIRANDA: But it was Daniel's spontaneity I fell in love with. . . .

And Daniel was funny, you know. He could always make me laugh.

MRS. DOUBTFIRE: I've always said, the key to a solid marriage is laughter.

MIRANDA: Yeah, well after a few years it stopped being so funny. I was always working. He was always between jobs. I barely got to see the kids. And on the nights I'd try to get off early and spend some time with them, I'd come home and the house would be wrecked. There were so many nights . . . I would just cry myself to sleep.

MRS. DOUBTFIRE: Really? (Pensive, surprised)

MIRANDA (honest): The truth of the matter is . . . I didn't like who I was when I was with Daniel. I became a different person. And I didn't want my children to grow up with that woman as their mother. . . .

Mrs. Doubtfire is silent, staring. Fascinated by this revelation.

MRS. DOUBTFIRE: I didn't know that.

(*MD*, 76–77)

These acts of mirroring from other characters enable Isabel and Daniel to see themselves in a new light and enable the viewers to understand the need for rethinking the family unit and the role that economic dependence plays in a marriage. In introducing the "other side of the story" in a nonconfrontational way, this device suggests that neither spouse is wholly to blame. It also raises a question: What patterns of interactions and assumptions that underpin gendered roles within the family created the problem within the marriage?

To some extent, the subplots offer answers to this question. On one level, the subplots reveal the different concerns about social boundaries in the respective historical moments. In the subplot of *East Lynne*, Isabel's neighbor Richard Hare falls in love with a lower-class woman named Afy Hallijohn, who accuses Richard of murdering her father; Richard spends years in exile as a result. This subplot reflects anxiety about the class struggles that so tore at the social fabric of Victorian Britain: when the classes mix, homes and families

are destroyed. The danger has been reshuffled in *Mrs. Doubtfire*: the class boundary is transformed into the boundary that separates personal and professional relationships. Unlike *East Lynne*, which splits the two transgressions (compelling the divorce, and crossing social boundaries) between Isabel and Richard, in *Mrs. Doubtfire*, Miranda commits both transgressions. The film's subplot is Miranda's romance with Stu, who is her client. Like Afy in *East Lynne*, Stu is one-dimensional, serving only to underscore the way Miranda's desire will do a disservice to her children. He is an awkward father-figure at best; at one point Stu's friend Ron describes him, "You? The guy who's never having kids, doesn't want anything to do with kids, doesn't date women who have kids?" (*MD*, 85). Miranda's romance with this man is incompatible with family values, although this is somewhat resolved by the end of the film, which shows Stu making an effort to include the children in Miranda's birthday dinner.

The subplot in the novel, however, is far more developed than in the film. Again, part of this is an artifact of the genre: a triple-decker Victorian novel has more room to develop a subplot than a two-hour film. But we can understand the relationship of the subplots to the project of refiguring the family if we examine the further implications of the lost spouse returning in disguise. In *Mrs. Doubtfire*, Daniel's disguise eliminates the potential sexual interaction with Miranda; in *East Lynne*, Isabel's disguise as a lowly governess eliminates the possibility that Archibald will consider her as belonging to a class from which he could choose a second (or third) wife. That is, disguise enables Daniel and Isabel to reconstitute their relationship with their spouses based on something other than sexual or class compatibility. Other elements—particularly respect and mutual responsibility—evolve and appear valuable precisely because they were missing from the marriages prior to the divorce. Given that the characters do not reform before it is "too late" to save their marriages, symbolic resolution must be achieved in other ways (*MD*, 13). In *Mrs. Doubtfire*, the divorce is allowed to stand. Miranda and Daniel reach a compromise and respect each others' different lifestyles and relationships with the children.

For the novel to close satisfactorily, however, the divorce must be "undone," in part because marriage was more crucial to social stability for the Victorians. Obviously, Carlyle cannot undo his marriage to Barbara and return to his first wife once he finds Isabel on her deathbed at the end of the novel. Instead, Lady Isabel dies and is replaced by Barbara, the better middle-class wife. The representation of this new model of wife, and a better type of marriage, is the primary function of the subplot, which becomes the main story line between

Isabel's railway accident (chapter 33) and Richard's exoneration (chapter 60). In her efforts to save her brother, Barbara shows herself to be an energetic and intelligent advocate for him. In stark contrast with Isabel's aristocratic uselessness, penury, and willfulness, which cause her to abandon her family and children, Barbara is practical, responsible, and a good partner for her lawyer husband. Significantly, however, the novel also hints that Barbara is a good wife as a result of her economic autonomy. Years before she marries, "Barbara [unlike Isabel] is in receipt of money of her own" and is not dependent upon her father's whims (*EL*, 416). She is also older, and having been in possession of her own funds and independence for several years, she does not succumb to being property. Indeed, unlike her mother, Mrs. Hare, who was "brought" to her husband's house years before, much like a piece of furniture, Barbara takes possession of "his chariot, now hers" after she marries Carlyle (*EL*, 61, 440).

This long and complex novel, which depicts a variety of marriageable women in varying states of economic and creative freedom, suggests that women's work and desire can either reinforce or destroy the home. *Mrs. Doubtfire* lacks this complexity and offers a much higher degree of closure. Despite its claims to offer an enlightened version of a family, depicting a career-woman mother and home-maker father, the film's ending is far more conservative with respect to patriarchal notions than the novel's. It fixes Daniel in the position of a man who has successfully integrated work and his domestic role and achieved authority at several narrative levels. Although the final voice-over claims that "there are all kinds of families," the voice-over is spoken by Daniel in his television role of Mrs. Doubtfire; and it is heard while Daniel drives off into the late-afternoon sun with his children, away from the house where Miranda stands transfixed by his image on the television. The man who was a voice-over artist at the beginning of the movie has become the giver of moral lesson to the movie. While *East Lynne* produces complexity through doubling the character of Isabel with not only Barbara, but also Mrs. Hare, Afy, and Lady Levison (who wants to divorce her murderer husband), *Mrs. Doubtfire* produces closure by reducing the doubling: it collapses the distinctions between Daniel's various roles of father, television star, and commentator on the movie. Somewhat alarmingly, *Mrs. Doubtfire* disavows the difficulties faced by workingwomen who want professional careers but who also must contend with society's expectations of mothers. Daniel seems to be able to sustain his professional and domestic roles—quite literally—simultaneously and with surprising ease, despite the existence of external judgment. I suggest that the

film needs a higher degree of closure because women's ability to fulfill their desires is enabled not by a legal act (i.e., the Divorce Act of 1857), but by emerging socioeconomic opportunities.

V. LOOK AGAIN—IT'S A NOVEL IN DISGUISE

Significantly, the Victorian novels I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter as having later re-visions all have protagonists who had problematic identities in the original versions: Magwitch (turned Jack Maggs in Carey's version) returns to Pip in disguise at the end of *Great Expectations*; in the search for the moonstone thief, Franklin Blake's identity merges with Godfrey Ablewhite (the original owner of the gem in Mukherjee's novel is Hannah/Pearl Singh); Heathcliff is a nameless foundling; and Jane Eyre confuses Bertha Mason and Grace Poole.

Disguise appears countless times in every period and genre of literature, from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* to Robert Ludlum's contemporary detective fiction. Disguise is an enduring convention in narrative because it permits writers and filmmakers to show resistance to existing ideologies, assumptions, and socioeconomic or political systems. It has a particular importance with respect to the Victorian novel, however. Partly due to legal events such as the Reform Bills and the Divorce Act of 1857, and partly due to challenges to existing women's rights such as those put forth by Caroline Norton and others, Victorian class systems and gender roles were under extreme pressure and in the process of dynamic change. Further, the Victorian popular novel, printed in numerous newspapers and cheap editions and read by a growing number of the literate public, provided a means of exploring identity as it was socially constructed. It disseminated narratives that would potentially transform ideas about gender and class. In Victorian novels, therefore, disguise often enables characters to reinstate themselves in a classed and gendered society on terms of their own choosing.

This moment of creativity, rebellion, choice, and agency on the part of a character within the novel is, perhaps, inspirational to readers-*cum*-writers. I believe that this moment motivates later writers to re-vision an old text from a new perspective (often, but not always, from the point of view of the character with the original problematic identity) in order to produce a narrative that is not told in the first novel. Disguise enables the re-visioning of a character's story *within* a novel or film; and, perhaps, in the way that it enables a character to revisit and re-comprehend her past, it compels re-visions beyond that

original narrative as well. That is, this special aspect of the disguise plot encourages other, later writers to reproduce the act of re-vision: it motivates them to reexamine the assumptions of and historical situations in the earlier texts.

These later novels, which re-name the original character and alter the historical and literary aspects to which they respond, demand that we "understand the assumptions in which we are drenched" in order to know ourselves. In comparing two different accounts, we might feel like detectives, searching for some hidden "truth" about cultural contexts or literary production that the re-vision brings to light from the depths of the earlier work, or potentially vice versa. The most productive critical work, of course, does more than reveal how the later work lays bare the earlier work's assumptions in order to show that they are naive or pernicious by our standards. A careful examination of the formal elements together with the content of a given work, however, can illuminate the way narrative structures reflect and underpin ideological formulations in a given historical period. Further, if we adopt a way of knowing based on reading both texts across each other rather than only one text across the other, we necessarily take up a position akin to the act performed by the characters themselves, like Isabel and Daniel, who listen to the "other story." It facilitates a way of knowing that sustains a tension, and a dialectic, between two stories. The space between the two texts enables creative readings—indeed, it compels readings that are oriented toward the process of discovery rather than the product of a final reading. It gestures to the process of re-vision that future readings entail.

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CHAPTER 8



MATRIX AND VOICE IN A. S. BYATT'S *POSSESSION*

Marguerite Helmers

Scheherazade is “one of the strongest and cleverest heroines in world literature,” asserts author A. S. Byatt. She “triumphs because she is endlessly inventive” (“*Greatest*,” 166). Byatt’s interest in Scheherazade provides a clue to her own creative impulses, for Byatt is a storyteller whose stories reflect on the telling of tales. She is a modern British Scheherazade. Rather than deploying a particular theory of female creativity, Byatt invokes fairy tale, myth, and the powerful connections between the organic notion of “procreativity” and the metaphysical aspects of artistic “creativity.” This chapter examines some of the ways that female creativity is encoded in Byatt’s 1990 novel *Possession: A Romance*. Her own idea that great stories are “shape-shifters” that survive retellings and republications (“*Greatest*,” 166) serves as a suitable metaphor for my selective retelling of *Possession*, whose central metaphor is that of a shape-shifting woman, the heroine of Breton folklore, Melusine.

Possession examines the lives of two fictional Victorian poets through the perspectives of several fictional contemporary scholars and critics. The two poets have lived on in their work; the scholars and critics are nourished mentally and sustained monetarily by the same works; and the sinuous, connective thread of narrative is represented by the recurrent figure of the fairy Melusine. A rich evocation

of the academic world of literary studies and the critical method, the novel often reads like a dance through Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's attic of nineteenth-century female imagery, conjuring the closed spaces and mad anti-heroines of the gothic novel. The novel intelligently incorporates the philosophies and practices of deconstruction, placing meaning on the margins and drawing attention to spaces set at thresholds of landscape, such as the border of a forest or the cliffs along the North Sea. Both fascinating and frustrating to readers, the novel incorporates the voices of many characters through their literary productions: poems, diaries, letters, and critical studies. This technique was used by Wilkie Collins in *The Woman in White* (1860), but without the reflexivity that Byatt provides from her twentieth-century, post-structuralist perspective. Byatt demands that the readers of *Possession* find meaning not only in the corpus of her book, but in the interstices, those scraps of language in which one voice penetrates another, those spaces between texts where meaning seems destined for collision and elision. The diverse texts that create this novel provide the strategies for reading that readers must adopt. Readers must avoid that most Victorian impulse to find closure in this novel, for as Byatt's rich images reveal, any attempt to tidy up or to pin down meaning will result in more spills, more questions, more chaos.

Possession follows the investigations of two young British PhDs, Roland and Maud, who in 1986 are researching the lives of the famous Victorian poet Randolph Henry Ash, modeled on Robert Browning, and the lesser-known "fairy poet" Christabel LaMotte, who resembles Christina Rossetti. Just as Browning's works in our own time have been the object of exhaustive critical and scholarly focus, so have the work and life of the fictional Randolph Henry Ash. The scholars who busy themselves in the "Ash Factory," a deep cellar of notebooks and facsimiles in the British Museum, believe they know every line, every innuendo, every reference in the comprehensive poetry, but they are in for a surprise when Roland's routine investigations into the "sources for Ash's *Garden of Proserpina*" in "Ash's own copy of Vico's *Principi di una Scienza Nuova*" uncover a love letter from the presumably happily married Ash to an unnamed single woman who is discovered to be Christabel LaMotte. The tangle of events that ensues is told through letters, diaries, journal articles, and the perspectives of two times: 1859 and 1986. Eventually, readers discover the answer to several mysteries and learn that LaMotte and Ash had an affair that resulted in the birth of a daughter; that the daughter was sent to

live with LaMotte's sister; that LaMotte's close friend, and perhaps lover, Blanch Glover, committed suicide over her anguish at being abandoned; that Ash's wife Ellen knew of the affair; and that while she burned several key papers, she buried a lock of pale blond hair that was not her own and a letter from LaMotte to Ash in her husband's grave.

As readers detect, characters' names suggest attitudes that readers might take in regard to them. Maud Bailey is heroically named after the Maud of Tennyson (*Maud, and Other Poems*, 1855), her last name a reference to a type of timber and earthwork defense called a motte-and-bailey, popular in the late Middle Ages. Roland Mitchell evokes the name of the hero on a quest, a Childe or Knight such as Browning made the hero of his poem, "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." The name "Ash" suggests the dust of the ground and, metaphorically, that of the human constitution (*OED*), the use of ashes as an expression of grief, the qualities of the tree from which he is named, a tree from which spears were made, and the Old English runic letter ash, symbolizing ash-tree (*OED*). LaMotte is both "the word" and also, again, the defense of motte-and-bailey, which is important, as Maud and Christabel are related. (In fact, the motte was a mound of earth located outside the womb-like bailey, a fact of architecture that doesn't escape Leonora Stern's eye in her study of LaMotte's sexualized landscapes—worlds of water, worlds of "small hillocks and rises," *Possession*, 265.) Christabel's association with the half-human, half-snake Melusine also recalls Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Christabel" (1816), in which the female heroine is seduced in a semi-erotic, quasi-lesbian encounter by the beautiful Geraldine, who is the manifestation of an evil, bright-green snake. Contemporary academics named Cropper, Blackadder, Stern, and Nest sardonically comment on the contestatory, hoarding, and suspicious faces of academia. That each character's name, and each character's words, holds the promise of multiple and contradictory interpretations is part of the fabric from which the mystery of *Possession* is woven. Byatt is, as her characters suggest about Ash, a "great ventriloquist" speaking through her characters in a voice that is at once her own and not her own, a voice of the threshold.

In doubling characters from the twentieth century with characters from the nineteenth century, and, in turn, doubling the nineteenth-century characters with legendary figures and fairy-tale plots, Byatt situates her novel in a middle ground between literary criticism, fiction, fantasy, and biography. Such a "contamination of

genres” (Curti, 40) calls into question the very meaning of the term “fiction.” Lidia Curti could be describing the novel *Possession* as she defines the term *fiction* for her readers:

Fiction translates the overcoming of dichotomies—theory and politics, art and life, surface and depth, substance and appearance—into hybrid shapes and languages; its characters (sometimes monsters, sometimes shadows, sometimes ghosts) inhabit borders, intermediate spaces, and move in an indistinct zone at the intersection between the human and the animal, the natural and the supernatural, the beautiful and the horrid, the self and many other selves.

(Curti, 29)

Curti’s words invoke a model of female creativity that is mystical and biological. Women writers can be said to “give birth” to their work, a metaphor explored by the European critics H  l  ne Cixous and Luce Irigaray. They also seek narrative and metaphysical connection to the stories of their foremothers, much as Scheherazade spins the web of narrative that connects her to the female creators in the present. Although *Possession* has been studied in several ways that expand upon the concepts announced in the title, “possession” and “romance” (Heilman, Shinn) and through the ways that the novel questions the end of history (Janik), a method of analysis is suggested by the text itself: what if we were to expand upon the critical theses set forth by the characters Leonora Stern and Maud Bailey and explore the liminality and metaphorical natures of female identity? This analysis would lead us to connect the “hybrid shapes” of narrative with the “self and many other selves” of the writer, her “muse,” and her characters.

The novel provides its own couplings and doublings of critical perspective. The character Leonora Stern, for example, has published a book entitled *Motif and Matrix in the Poems of LaMotte* (265), and Maud is writing a history of LaMotte’s Melusina, exploring “liminality. Thresholds. Bastions” (549). It is this line of inquiry that I propose to develop through the connection between the nineteenth-century woman poet Christabel LaMotte and her Breton folk heroine Melusine. In this chapter, I can explore only a fragment of the complex fabric of this novel. By focusing attention on the parallels that Byatt draws between Maud, Christabel, and Melusine, I read the novel as a work of fiction and a work of feminist theory that intervenes into contemporary debates about the construction of female identity and the voice of the female writer. Stern’s work on matrices suggests the strategy for reading that readers of the novel *Possession* should adopt in regard to Byatt’s text: they should read it as

if it is set amidst “significantly evasive landscapes, with features which deceive or elude the penetrating gaze, tactile landscapes which do not privilege the dominant stare” (263). In other words, the reader should transform all boundaries into frontiers, realizing that there are always more. The metaphor is the primary example of this power of language. One word, representing another word, but ceaselessly subject to interpretation, the metaphor is a matrix or web. As Roland notes after reading Stern’s *Motif and Matrix*, “everything connects and connects” (276). In a similar vein, the feminist critic Carol Gilligan has postulated that, women illuminate life “as a web . . . stressing continuity and change in configuration” (48). She refers to this as “a more creative and cooperative mode of life” (49).

Yet Roland is disturbed by Leonora’s text. It prompts him to question his own desire to find “a clue to the true nature of things” (276). Annotating the complete works of Randolph Henry Ash, the project begun by Blackadder and continued by Roland, suggested to Roland and the reading public that all in life is represented in art, that eventually the truth will be pinned down like a specimen of a butterfly on a canvas mat. Yet that comprehensive compendium of knowledge that is Blackadder’s life’s work remains unfinished as the novel opens. We find instead that Ash’s life was suggested more through encryption than inscription: there are allusions in his poems to the poetry and life of Christabel LaMotte that his critics ascribed to his comprehensive imaginative genius rather than revealing them to be the desire to write Christabel into the texture of his life. Maud and Roland discover that Christabel, too, wrote Randolph Henry Ash into her own poems, sprinkling her texts with allusions to the ash tree. Ash and LaMotte even share a line of poetry: “‘And shall those founts / Which freely flowed to meet our thirsts, be sealed? / ‘Which came first? His line or her line?’ ask Maud and Roland” (258). The secret of the literary corpus of both Ash and LaMotte was that their corporeal bodies met in mutual ecstasy during a trip to Whitby and Robin Hood’s Bay in 1859.

The novel itself is a threshold. Opening its covers, readers step inside the narrative and suspend the temporal world to be absorbed in the fictional. Readers are both overpowered by the text, enough to sit in suspended and solitary state, and also empowered to exercise their own power of reading, filling gaps, making predictions, skimming poems, adding motion. Byatt plays with this aspect of reading in *Possession*. The primary plot of the novel, in which Maud and Roland attempt to solve the mystery of the woman in Ash’s life, has a chiasmic structure: it opens with Roland opening Ash’s copy of Vico, a black casket-like volume, to find a draft letter written to Christabel

LaMotte; it closes with the opening of Ash's casket in the graveyard of the Hodershall Parish church, under "a weathercock in the shape of a flying dragon" (528). The secrets of the text, as the philosopher of science Evelyn Fox Keller writes, "function to articulate a boundary: an interior not visible to outsiders, the demarcation of a separate domain, a sphere of autonomous power" (178). As critics, Maud, Roland, Stern, Blackadder, and Cropper exercise a power over LaMotte's and Ash's texts, while also admitting that they are captured by the spell of the poetry. While the outward lives of the poets are inscribed in the settings and subjects of their poems, the details of their relationship and possible alternate interpretations of their lives are encrypted in their texts. In examining the body of work that is the poets', the scholars' desire to know the truth only demonstrates that each explanation produces another script, and gives birth to another tale. Each explanation puts us at yet another threshold.

If it is not too much of an irony to describe her thus, the central *liminal* character of the novel is Melusine, the sorceress, half-woman, half-snake who flows through LaMotte's poetry like an obsession. From the standpoint of traditional literary criticism, Melusine is a marginal character since she has no physical or speaking role in the novel. She is silent; it is LaMotte who gives her voice through her creativity; it is LaMotte who is able to challenge the bonds of silence that are imposed upon women by the outside world.

LaMotte asks the question that can never be fully answered, a question that is the central question of the novel. "And what was she, the Fairy Melusine?" (314). Melusine's body, neither human nor inhuman, inscribes her difference. Like LaMotte's life and her poetry, Melusine's body is full of secrets, powerful and devastating. In Breton legend, Melusine is a woman, serpent from the waist down. Melusine, who had spied on her mother in childbirth, is punished by her mother to assume the shape of a serpent one day each week. According to the folklorist Barbara Fass Leavy, she is promised that she may regain a human soul if she wins the love and loyalty of a human male (237-38). When she marries into the family of the Count of Lusignan, she closes a heavy door behind her each week. Alone in the quiet interior of her chamber, she alters her shape, reverting to a serpent or perhaps *recovering* the physical shape of a snake. She could be said to have "a room of her own," to employ Virginia Woolf's famous phrase. But this room is penetrated by her husband. In a symbolic rape, he spies upon her quiet regeneration.

Fergus Wolff, one of Byatt's characters, a known womanizer (his own name an allusion to the sexually charged lycanthrope or

wolf-man)—and student of French theory—has his own version of the story of Melusine, picking up from where Melusine marries into the family of Lusignan:

They had six sons, all with strange defects—odd ears, giant tusks, a cats-head growing out of one cheek, three eyes, that sort of thing . . . She built castles, real ones that still exist. [In the end her husband looked through the keyhole as she was taking her bath, hoping to illuminate his curiosity about her secret], and there she was in a great marble bath disporting herself. And from the waist down she was a fish or a serpent, Rabelais says an “andouille,” a kind of huge sausage, the symbolism is obvious, and she beat the water with her muscular tail.

(38)

Like the opening of the copy of Vico and of Ash’s casket, the Count opens the door to his wife’s water closet and makes a discovery that will change his life. The door is a boundary, a literal threshold. Stepping beyond the boundary entails discovery, but also raises new questions. In her epic poem “The Fairy Melusine,” LaMotte describes Melusine from the male perspective as a terrible dragon,

Men say, at night, around the castle-keep
The black air ruffles neath the outstretched vans
Of a long flying worm.

(314)

On the other hand, “the old nurse” in the poem knows that “in the dead of night” a woman comes to suckle her young boys: “Warm tears in silence mingled with the milk” (314–15). One of the central questions about Melusine is the shape that she adopts. She is a woman, a snake, a dragon, a worm, a fish. She is like the prophetess Sibyll; she is like a mermaid; she is like a siren. Like Melusine, LaMotte is both heterosexual and homosexual, her bisexuality highlighting and calling into question (“what was she?”) the very nature of the man/woman binary that neatly describes difference. It can be argued that given this novel’s tendency to set so many questions at the boundaries, Byatt models deconstruction. She sets up binaries and dualities and erases them. She offers third sexes, third options for meanings. Like Scheherazade, she offers possibilities for exploring the interrelationships of creativity, procreation, sexuality, and narrative.

One of the striking aspects of this passage is Wolff’s assertion that Melusine’s castles “still exist.” It is an assertion of fact, but also a fanciful embroidery on Wolff’s tale, and thus is neither fact nor

fiction, but a description of place in which the two can co-exist. The mingling of legend and landscape was pronounced in the Breton Isles and coastal areas of Great Britain until the mid-twentieth century. Readers are familiar with the sightings of the most famous mythical creature of northern Britain, the Loch Ness Monster. That the real castles of Melusine exist is another threshold for the reader. Entering the castles puts us in the realm of myth and legend, transporting us, in mind, into the past. Gwen Benwell notes in her study of mermaids that British families and clans claim to be descended from sea-people (140). In Ash and LaMotte's time, mermaids were familiar exhibits in coffeehouses and public houses in London (such as the Turf Coffeehouse in 1822 and a public house in Spitalfields in 1858), when the "systemic discourse" of science and classification attempted to rid the world of superstition, myth, and legend (Ritvo, 31, 178–79, 181). This historical milieu provides an insight into the different, and at times severely conflicting, epistemologies that Ash and LaMotte work from, for Ash is the scientist, classifier, and collector, while LaMotte is the "fairy poet."

The legendary serpent-tailed Melusine doubles for LaMotte's creative and procreative powers in the novel. Making love to her in a rented room in Yorkshire while on a "natural history expedition," Randolph Henry Ash finds LaMotte to twist like "liquid," the "waves of the sea," a "moving and slippery silence" (308). "My selkie, my white lady," Ash whispers to her, invoking the Celtic legends of the woman who may assume human form if her seal skin is stolen by a young man. Mermaids are threshold figures because they originate in water, "which is often symbolic of liminal states, including gendered and erotic fluidity" (Conner, 71). Maud, at one point in the narrative, even dons a coat like a selkie's seal skin, on which a "long Chinese dragon" is embroidered "on its aquamarine ground," wavering "along the shifting carpets" like the coils of Melusine in the foaming sea (163). In selecting Melusine as the legendary character upon whom LaMotte fixes her poetry, Byatt is drawing attention to one of the most powerful currents of myths in Western literature, those that incorporate half-human female figures. The mermaid has served human representation in various forms throughout the past 700 years, variously representing avarice, sexual appetite, procreation, and artistic creation. The mermaid is related to the sirens and harpies. The sirens were friends of the lovely Proserpine, another threshold figure who stands between life and death, summer and winter, stolen from her mother and friends by the god of the underworld, Pluto. For their mournful songs, they

were, in some versions in the legend, turned into the foul-smelling and terrifying harpies, with wings sprouting from their arms and claws tearing from their feet. Melusine, in the version of the legend told by Byatt's character Wolff, becomes something of a harpy after she is discovered by her husband. "I should never have married a horrible snake" [the count cried]. And then she reproached him and turned into a dragon, and flew away round the battlements making a terrible noise and battering the stones" (38).

Similar legends about the transformation of beauty into foulness are told about the prophetess Sibyll of Cumae, who refused the love of Apollo, despite receiving from him the gift of eternal life. Surrounded by women in her labyrinthine caves in the Apennines, she was said to turn into a monster only on Saturday (Warner, 4). Although there are earlier representations of half-human figures that derive from non-Western cultures, the mermaid was "invented" in Western literature and folklore around the seventh century A.D. by a monk who was reconciling a translation of Ovid (who had described sirens—traditionally bird women—as "sea-monsters"). Significantly, the half-human female's *bestial* half was employed by early Christian scholars and later textual commentators to represent that which was least desirable in women. The mermaid wears in perpetuity the marker of her difference and her original sin: her tail, the reminder of the serpent who tempted her in the garden of Eden. In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Satan's avatar, Sin, represents both woman and serpent:

Woman to the waist, and fair,
 But [ending] foul in many a scaly fold
 Voluminous and vast, a Serpent arm'd
 with mortal sting."

(qtd. Gilbert and Gubar, 197)

After Eve has tasted the forbidden fruit, Adam cries aloud to her much the same as the Count of Lusignan cries out to Melusine, "Out of my sight, thou Serpent." Gilbert and Gubar, in their discussion of woman as monster, note that Milton's construction of Eve "exaggerates and parodies female anatomy," setting "fairness" against "foulness," the angel against the monster, the virgin against the magdalen (197). Madness itself is a deconstruction of the normal bounds of rationality, especially female madness. Feminist critics have used madness as a trope of the woman who is oppressed by patriarchal culture; it is the male who names the female as "illogical" and it is the male who constructs the asylums to confine her. In either case, the female

voice is restricted and silenced. Within the novel *Possession*, critic Leonora Stern addresses the border position of logic and madness as a female epistemology, “in-formed by illogic and structured by feeling and in-tuition” (266).

In the nineteenth century, however, women’s mental states were thought to be easily corrupted by various “female maladies,” bodily secretions such as menstruation and lactation. Keller sheds light on this medical and social phobia from a twentieth-century perspective, nothing that “the secrets of women . . . have traditionally been seen by men as . . . threatening . . . by virtue of the fact that they articulate a boundary that excludes them” (178). On Melusine, this boundary is marked once by the door closed against her husband and by the line at the waist dividing woman from serpent. Contemporary surgeon and medical anthropologist Cecil Helman notes that, like Melusine discovered in her bath, women are still predicted to erupt in a “monthly rage, with fangs and flying hair” to “spill . . . contagious blood across the ordered certainties of masculine life,” only now the discourse of medicine has sanitized this rage into a neat acronym, PMS (76). In an 1848 medical work women were said to be “less under the influence of the brain than the uterine system” (Helman, 55), their unpredictable behavior marked as hysteria. Freud, that great mythographer of the early twentieth century, likened hysteria to polymorphism, since women seemed to alter their subjectivity when under the control of the uterus, just as Melusine alters her shape. Again, Helman cites a 1981 report in a London medical newspaper that attributed a barmaid’s attack on a policeman as evidence of PMS, which “revealed ‘the hidden animal within her,’ forcing her to “violence and aggression” (Helman, 58).

Ash enters into a phase of natural history researches just after meeting LaMotte; it is on his expedition to collect specimens in Yorkshire that the two have their first sexual encounter. In the novel, Roland explains that critics traditionally marked this time in Ash’s life as a response to the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859); in a sense, Ash himself crossed a threshold into the world of the scientific. Of course, after the discovery of the letter to Christabel LaMotte, Roland finally realizes that Ash had private reasons for being interested in nature in 1859: the anatomy of Christabel LaMotte would need sufficient time to be explored. Ash is known as “the great collector,” for his copious references to natural history, legend, and etymology in his poems. The character of the American critic Mortimer Cropper, himself a “great collector” of Ash’s possessions, dryly points out that the trip to Yorkshire prompted Ash to make “a particular study of

the reproductive system of his chosen life-forms” (270). Yet Cropper couldn’t hesitate to imagine what Ash may have thought about his collections of sea-creatures, and peppers the text of his biography *The Great Ventriloquist* with accusations of cruelty:

with his scalpel and killing-jar, dealing death to the creatures he found so beautiful . . . parting and slicing, scraping and piercing tough and delicate tissues in an attempt by all possible means to get at the elusive stuff of Life itself.

(270)

According to Cropper, Ash’s work is a rape of landscape, a rape of the rocky coasts of the North Sea in the name of science and personal discovery. It is a brutal picture of Ash. Once readers encounter this castigation, it is possible to read the encounter between Ash and LaMotte as a savage and brutal possession of one body by another.

Along chalky cliffs near Whitby, also a dividing line between the elements of earth and water, land and sea, Ash watches his beloved Christabel LaMotte glide along chalky cliffs in Yorkshire, helping him collect specimens for his boxes and jars and poems. He recalls, as he calls it, “an odd linguistic fact”—“the word for waist in Italian is *vita*, is life—and this must be, he thought, to do with the navel, which is where our separate lives cast off” (312). The navel is where the womb is located, where the umbilical cord leaves its mark, and where, as Ash puts it, “my desire has its end” (312). He thinks in French, in Italian, in Latin, significantly being intrigued by LaMotte’s difference, but unable to name that difference:

He thought too of the Fairy Melusina, a woman *jusqu’au nombril, sino alloa vita, useque ad umbilicum*, as far as the waist. This is my centre, he thought, here, at this place, at this time, in her, in that narrow place, where my desire has its end.

(312)

Obviously the “phallic-serpentine shape suggests her usurpation of male power and dominance,” as Fass Leavy says of Melusina. Even more frightening, however, is that the tail of Melusine reveals her to have no vagina; she is thus a nonwoman, a woman whose very lack is absent. As Irigaray writes, “Her sex organ represents the horror of having nothing to see.” Such a curiosity would interest Ash, whose scientific impulse to collect and classify nature is just one manifestation of the way to control the vagaries of nature and the procreative powers of women. Writing about nineteenth-century

science, Keller draws attention to the very metaphors that are embedded in Cropper's prose:

The ferreting out of nature's secrets, understood as the illumination of a female interior, or the tearing of nature's veil, may be seen as expressing one of the most unembarrassedly stereotypic impulses of the scientific project. In this interpretation, the task of scientific enlightenment—the illumination of the reality behind appearances—is an inversion of surface and interior, and interchange between visible and invisible, that effectively routs the last vestiges of archaic, subterranean female power . . . Scientific enlightenment is in this sense a drama between visibility and invisibility, between light and dark, and also, between female procreativity and male productivity.

(Keller, 178)

We can infer from the work of Foucault that the discourse of medicine seeks to classify and regulate those in the system, especially those who are considered transgressive or aberrant. Keller, too, has asserted that the "Laws of Nature," significantly phrased as if they exist a priori, were formulated by men in an effort to constrain that which, in nature, was ascribed as the feminine traits of irrationality, opacity, and vagary.

Horrible monster, unstable in body, Melusine and her creator LaMotte are also, presumably, hysteric or unstable in mind. And certainly this interior and exterior tension is highlighted by LaMotte's poem *The Fairy Melusina*, in which "a long flying worm, whose sinewy tail / And leather pinions beat the parted sky" cries aloud at night, "a cry of pain and loss . . . whirls in the wind's screaming and is gone" (314). Gilbert and Gubar note that for nineteenth-century writers, physical deformity marked "inner disease," possibly the disease of sexual knowledge (569). We can recall here that Melusine's own children were born with "strange defects—odd ears, giant tusks, a catshead growing out of one cheek" (38). LaMotte incorporated into the poem some of her own hysteria over the loss of her daughter and loss of her friend and closeted herself in her own "castle-keep" at Bailey Croysant le Wold, her insanity brought on, in keeping with nineteenth-century medical doctrine, by pregnancy, lactation, and menstruation.

Yet LaMotte's enforced postpartum "closeting" in the turret of the Bailey estate also regulates her possible transgressive sexuality, for LaMotte appears to be bisexual. This is a further amplification of the theme of liminality that runs throughout the novel. Certainly

LaMotte could be said to have usurped the pen (and penis) from male writers in her time. Beyond that, however, is a further suggestion that LaMotte is herself a kind of deity such as Melusine. The mythographer Randy Conner points out that

in many cultures, individuals whose expression of gender lies beyond the bounds of masculine-feminine duality . . . have been envisioned, in the terms of cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, as “threshold persons.” As such, they are thought to inhabit the threshold or *limen* [and manifest] erotic diversity in the form of same-sex intimacy.

(Conner, 72)

Certainly Ash suspects that LaMotte has been intimate with her housemate Blanche Glover, for, washing away LaMotte’s blood from his thighs in the morning after their first night of passion, he puzzles, “Such delicate skills, such informed desire, and yet a virgin. There were possibilities, of which the most obvious was to him slightly repugnant, and then . . . interesting, too . . . He liked to know everything he could—even this—but he knew better than to be curious” (310). Unlike the Count of Lusignan, Ash had “no narrative” to bind him in his curiosity about his selkie (310), yet his repugnance and refusal to pursue knowledge signify that this interior should not be illuminated. Amplifying this point, Leavy comments that “ancient fears of women or myths of feminine evil seem to rest in part on the anxiety that women will exercise an ever-present potential for widespread destruction of the social order” (240). Although LaMotte had, the night before, “exacted her pleasure from him, opened herself to it, clutched for it,” she “made no more specific move to pleasure him, the male” (308). Characteristically, Ash describes his thoughts about LaMotte in a curiously detached language, as if observing natural behaviors of creatures other than human.

Leavy again provides a commentary suitable for LaMotte’s poem: “The Melusine type character may mark her true essence in order to protect herself from man himself, who may emphasize the animal in her in order to diminish it in his own self-image” (240). Literary critics such as Akira Mizuta Lippit assert that although “animals have traditionally served as a means of understanding human existence,” critics and philosophers need to resist human models and attempt to recoup an authentic animal consciousness (4). Recall that in fable and painting, animals are reduced to decoration, symbol, and allegory; they are doubles to which human attributes are ascribed.

Gelder refuses to draw such a definite boundary between humans as a priori knowing subjects and animals as a priori represented objects. He asserts that the recognition of the animal as Other is an uncanny moment that recalls our own prehistory as humans: “Something seems unfamiliar only because one has ‘alienated it’—repressed it—from consciousness, so that its (re) appearance or (re)animation provokes anxiety” (44). Hence the onset of human fear and the desire for mastery. Ideally, we must recognize the animal as animal, recognize what is *unheimlich* (unfamiliar) and reject the *heimlich* (familiar). This moment should be radical and disquieting, and at the moment of recognition, we should drop all human propensities to story-telling and anthropomorphizing.

The most foundational assumption of human-animal relations is that “in the tradition of Western philosophy, speechlessness has determined an essential condition of the animal” (Lippit, 61). Speech is the foundation of human subjectivity, that which allows us to articulate our identity, reflect on our actions, and make predictions about the future. Speech allows us anticipation and memory. It provides human society with a moral and ethical framework. Politically, it allows women a voice in government, art, and the family. In this, however, Melusine and LaMotte frustrate their oppressors, for the Melusine who is created by LaMotte’s fictions is an articulate and capable ruler prior to her banishment by her husband, and LaMotte is the author of popular poems in her time and the foundation of critical work in ours.

Gilbert and Gubar propose that in re-reading nineteenth-century novels, it is clear that “genius and sexuality *are* diseases in women, diseases akin to madness,” for “female genius triggers uncontrollable sexual desires” (569). Women’s speech and women’s writing can be construed as a dangerous excrescence. As LaMotte laments in her Melusine epic, “But let the Power take a female form / And ’tis the Power is punished” (317). Christabel LaMotte speaks, as does the poet Sibyll. For Sibyll, however, this loquaciousness came with a price; she became attractive to Apollo, who promised her eternal life if she slept with him. When she refused, she became a living, aging, decaying monster. Christabel’s learnedness makes her attractive to Ash. Scheherazade’s beauty brings her to the attention of the prince; her learnedness keeps her alive.

There are many inflections of the mermaid legend in history. The mermaid has been co-opted by male ideologies into a symbol of the relationship of women to nature. She has been both the pure woman, inviolable because of her fish-tail shield, and the transgressive

woman, aching with desire for the body and privileges of a human. The mermaid is unusual among monsters and mythical creatures because she invites the gaze of the male spectator with her beauty and her sylvan voice rather than repelling it with a loathsome visage. The fable has been continuously reinvented, from the *Odyssey* to the 1984 film *Splash* and Disney's *Little Mermaid*, Ariel. Because fairy tales can be adapted to many audiences in many centuries to serve many purposes (they are "chameleon-like," as Joseph Campbell calls them), they are always ready to be reinvented, for the boundaries to be refigured anew, for the conflicts to be reinterpreted; thus, what the mermaid means is, like her shape, never stable. This is the conclusion of Leonora Stern, who finds in Melusina the voice of female desire:

Melusina, singing to herself on the brink of this mystic fountain, is a potent being of great authority who knows the beginnings and ends of things—and is, as has been pointed out, in her aspect of water-serpent, a complete being, capable of generating life, or meanings, on her own, without need for external help.

(267)

The figure of Melusine is easily compared to a favorite figure of feminist criticism today: the cyborg. "We are all cyborgs," Donna Haraway claimed in the 1991 book *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, and her metaphor of a being that is part human and part machine has been widely adopted because it signifies living on the margins, coexistence with ambiguities. Haraway uses the cyborg as a metaphor for existence without difference, invoking the self as a continuously liminal figure existing outside of gender polarities and outside of the nature/culture debate as a completely new, late twentieth-century construction. In the film *Blade Runner*, she was reworked into a cyborg, the exotic dancer "Miss Salome" of The Snake Pit. Both Miss Salome and her snake are artificial life forms, replicants, completely artificial bodies that cannot be distinguished from the real. Miss Salome, who retains the name of the archetypal femme fatale, represents the ultimate manifestation of Haraway's claim.

The significance of the novel *Possession* is in its displacement of meaning onto liminal figures such as Melusine and Sibyll. The novel resists a central, unifying meaning, instead raising questions, opening doors, and suggesting other scripts. Feminist readings, in particular, point out marginality, "not to win the center for ourselves, but to point at the irreducibility of the margin in all explanations" (Curti, 3).

Since the 1960s, feminist inquiry has contested representations and enclosures, the glass coffins and glass ceilings of contemporary life. Its encounters take place at the borders, at the languages and practices that delineate difference. The mermaid is a disruptive figure in art, one that heralds a change. Rather than offering a prescription for feminist representation in art, however, Byatt suggests that the mermaid is a reappropriated representation of the creative potential for women to write their own destinies. The mermaid's song is a song of pain and loss, of joy and discovery. It is perpetually moving with the winds and the tides, ceaselessly shifting.

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CHAPTER 9



CREATION AND PROCREATION IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S "GIVING BIRTH": A NARRATIVE OF DOUBLES

Pascale Sardin

Margaret Atwood is a very prolific writer: her output comprises five collections of short stories and fiction, ten-odd collections of poems, and eleven novels, not including her numerous critical essays, anthologies, and articles. Needless to say, Atwood does not lack “creativity,” “the ability to use [one’s] imagination to produce new ideas, make things” (Longman, 368). I will be reading “Giving Birth,” the last piece in Atwood’s first collection of stories entitled *Dancing Girls* (1977), not as a way to explain her literary productiveness—which may simply have something to do with hard work and talent—but rather as a key to revealing how Atwood, as a woman and, incidentally a mother, may be willing to envisage female creativity.

“Giving Birth” is not very different in tone from the other stories of the collection in its description of the strange, sometimes melodramatic or absurd lives of seemingly ordinary people living in dismal Canadian towns. Yet the status of “Giving Birth” is noteworthy, as it holds a strategic place in the collection, being positioned at the very end, as a literary commentary on what has preceded it, and as a testament to what the reader has just read. Indeed, “Giving Birth” stands out against the other stories of the collection since it is the only

overtly metatextual story of the lot, focusing on a nameless female narrator seen in the act of writing the story of another woman who is going through the experience of childbirth. So we will see how "Giving Birth" can serve not only as a lens through which to reflect, more or less ironically, on the act of writing and reading the other stories of the collection, but also as a means by which we can reflect on some of Atwood's major works, and, mostly, on her understanding of feminine creativity in general.

In this chapter I will thus be discussing the intimate link Atwood establishes between gestating books and babies. Further, I will insist on the analogy between these two apparently opposed acts or "events," one supposedly involving only the mind, the other only the body. We will see how this traditional dichotomy, which raises the issue of women's creativity in the artistic field, is negated not only by Atwood but also by other women artists and thinkers. In the wake of Gilbert and Gubar, who questioned the patriarchal equation between the pen and the penis in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Nancy Huston, another Canadian novelist and essayist, qualifies this dichotomy in her *Creation Diary*, celebrating the artistic possibilities contained in pregnancy and mothering. While analyzing the fate of artists and thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Sylvia Plath, or Virginia Woolf, she reminds us that the relationship between creation and procreation has rarely been a straightforward one for women artists, even in the twentieth century. Atwood's story fictionalizes this dichotomy by giving voice to a female narrator seen in the act of writing the story of Jeanie's childbirth. What is amazing about Jeanie is that she projects her own fears and evil thoughts on a doomed alter ego. Giving birth, like writing, is not only presented as an activity involving body and mind, but is also negotiated by the author along the lines of a "story of doubles." In the same way as the act of birthing is experienced as a splitting in two, self and other, the act of writing is envisioned as a game of mirrors, as a symbolic creation of a new self separate from the author.

In her essay on literary creativity, "Negotiating with the Dead," Atwood discusses the fact that in the popular imagination, the nineteenth-century writer often represented himself as a double figure, a mask hiding a shadowy self, an "evil twin" (35). Indeed, as Atwood puts it half-jokingly, in the "Romantic ideal of self-expression and genius [. . .] someone [had] to play the more exalted part while you [were] snoring with your mouth open. Or, vice versa, someone [had] to do the snoring while you [were] writing the poem" (53). In "Negotiating with the Dead," though, Atwood does not seem to be

willing to discuss the female/male dialectic of this issue as Gilbert and Gubar did when they asserted that “the schizophrenia of authorship” is “one to which a woman writer is especially susceptible” (*Mad-woman*). Yet she fictionalizes it repeatedly in her works, albeit from a postmodern standpoint. Like Huston, whose novel *Instruments of Darkness* seems to toy quite literally with Nathaniel Hawthorne’s assertion (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar) that the “woman writes as if the Devil was in her” (213), Atwood plays with the female anxieties about literary creativity in her fiction, as she does in real life when she refers to herself playfully as O.W. Toad, an anagram of Atwood, as “autre” in French (“other”) is a near anagram of “auteur” (“author”).

In “Giving Birth,” “the schizophrenia of authorship” is dramatized from the start as Atwood establishes a dialogue between the narrator and the implied author in the first lines of her story: “But who gives it? And to whom is it given?” (*DG*, 225). Indeed, this introduction reads like a reflection on the title of the short story —“Giving Birth”— supposedly given by the implied author of the text. The author/narrator couple is replicated later on in the short story by the narrator/reader couple when the narrator addresses the implied reader in Sternian fashion. Subsequently, the first-person narrator, who stands for the mask or persona of the author, and whose voice is very quickly identified as that of a woman, creates a fictitious female character named Jeanie. This fact is asserted by the narrator in an ironic Freudian negation: “This story about giving birth is not about me” (*DG*, 226), reminding us of Mary Shelley’s famous denial introducing *Frankenstein*: “I did not make myself the heroine of my tales” (6). Like Shelley, who denies at first that her “too common-place” life contained any of the “romantic woes or wonderful events” (6) that make the stuff of poetry or fiction, the persona’s life is described as drably “solid” (*DG*, 227), as unromantically “calm and orderly” (227). The denial is repeated, confirming the ontological and tautological fact that “alter egos” are both the same and other: “The point, for me, is in the hair,” notes the narrator of “Giving Birth” quite offhandedly. “My own hair is not light brown, but Jeanie’s was. This is one difference between us” (*DG*, 228). The irony is all the more forceful since, in order to deny any possible identification with the character she has created, the narrator dwells quite lengthily on another replication, that of the mother-daughter dyad. Indeed, the narrator is the mother of a young daughter, her “miniature” alter ego, who “already [. . .] is wearing miniature jeans, miniature T-shirts” (*DG*, 226).

But what is even more striking is that the reader is soon made aware that another doubling is at stake: the first-person narrator imagines

that Jeanie is shadowed by a sinister figure who “like Jeanie, is going to the hospital,” a double who like Jeanie “is pregnant” (*DG*, 230). The reader does not meet this mysterious character immediately; her introduction in the plot is delayed in a dramatic fashion as that of the main protagonist in a comedy by Molière. In fact, in many ways, this shadowy figure is the actual protagonist of Atwood’s story. The first allusions to Jeanie’s double are ambiguous ones and could well be taken at face value:

There are two other people in the car with Jeanie. One is a man, whom I will call A., for convenience. A. is driving. [. . .] But there is another person in the car. She’s sitting in the front seat, and she hasn’t turned or acknowledged Jeanie in any way. [. . .] Jeanie has seen this woman from time to time throughout her pregnancy, always in the same coat, always the same kerchief.

(*DG*, 229–230)

Eventually, midway through the story, the narrator clarifies the situation for the reader: “The woman was not real in the usual sense [. . .]. She is aware that the woman is not really there: Jeanie is not crazy” (*DG*, 232).

Unsurprisingly, Jeanie projects on her alter ego all her fears and negative feelings concerning maternity. Jeanie is not consciously afraid for herself, nor is she “exactly afraid of this woman,” the narrator explains, she “is afraid for her” (*DG*, 232). She projects onto this woman, wearing “maroon and brown” (*DG*, 230), the color of clotted blood, all the miseries of unwanted pregnancy: “Why doesn’t she want to have a baby? Has she been raped, does she have ten other children? Is she starving? Why hasn’t she had an abortion?” (*DG*, 236). Further, she also projects onto her all the threats and actual pains of delivery: “Internal bleeding, shock, heart failure, a mistake on the part of someone, a nurse, a doctor” (*DG*, 235), “the pain and terror” (*DG*, 236) and the uncertainties of being a “newly born” mother. “Perhaps she is one of those casualties (and how can Jeanie herself be sure, yet, that she will not be among them) who will go into postpartum depression and never come out?” (*DG*, 239) Their doubled configuration can be further identified as a personification of the mother-child dyad, of the psychological ambivalence felt by mothers toward the fetus growing inside their bodies and the newly born baby, a concept elaborated upon by several French psychoanalysts, in the wake of the theories of D. W. Winnicott and Melanie Klein. As a personification of the hate/love relationship that

takes place inside the mother-child dyad, the fetus is often experienced as an alien in the woman's womb and, at the same time, as an inseparable part of herself; and when the child is born it fosters cruelly ambivalent, most often repressed, feelings. But most of all, the other woman can be seen as a representation of the "debt of life" a woman "owes" her own mother when she herself becomes a mother. For the French psychoanalyst Monique Bydlowski, this "debt of life takes often the metaphoric form of a shadow, an alter ego or a guardian angel" (*Je Réve*, 45), as in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's story the "Woman without a Shadow," in which the double embodies both a promise of death and eternal life. After becoming a mother, a woman not only makes the oedipal dream come true by symbolically offering her child to her father, she also unconsciously identifies with the archaic maternal image trapped inside her just as the foetus is trapped inside her; she has, in Bydlowski's words, met the "shadow of her own mother" (*La Dette*, 76).

The text itself clearly mimics these reflexive splittings. The *mise en abyme* process, along with the pattern of the text made up of numerous, at times lengthy, parentheses and digressions, acts out at the word level this self/other, inside/out, container/content dialectic, while the myth of Narcissus is made present through the intertwined motifs of vision, reflection, depth, echo, which are literally "reminders of another world" (*DG*, 227), to quote the first-person narrator. For death is omnipresent in this short story: symbolically through the mirror imagery standing for fate and mortality, as in Otto Rank's theory of doubles, but also in the dual problematic of mourning in creation and procreation.

This story is not only the story of the "hell" of childbirth; it expresses first and foremost the story of the biological, philosophical, and psychological analogy between gestating, mothering, and death. In "Giving Birth," from the start, the narrator works out the philosophical analogy between "giving birth" and "dying": "No one ever says giving death although they are in some ways the same, events, not things" (*DG*, 225). On a phenomenological plane, being a mother is like being "partly transparent, partly dead" (*DG*, 239). But Atwood also points to the fact that maternity confronts women with the biological possibility of death—"Is she dead? Is the baby dead?" (*DG*, 239)—and to their own psychological sense of mortality, to the process of aging: "Depending on the light, [the woman] has appeared by turns as a young girl of perhaps twenty to an older woman of forty or forty-five, but there was never any doubt in Jeanie's mind that it was the same woman" (*DG*, 232). As Monique

Bydlowski explains: “Being pregnant and giving birth means accepting the fact that one’s reflection in the mirror becomes blurred, that the shattered image of one’s youth is replaced by another one, that of the tarnished reflection of the ageing mother, revealing the implicit coming of one’s own death” (*Je Réve*, 47).

For the story of motherhood—as told in the biblical and Occidental myths of Eve, Sarah, or Demeter—deals with dispossession and loss (*Je Réve*, 156). In fairy tales, good mothers are absent or dead. As already mentioned, on the unconscious psychological path leading to the possibility of mothering, the daughter has to pay her “debt of life,” she has to encounter the image of the archaic mother; but this image must be, according to Bydlowski, that of a “weak-enough” mother. When the mother figure is too narcissistic and too all-powerful, in fact, too phallic, the necessary phase of maternal identification to the tender relationship with the pre-oedipal mother becomes impossible. “For the essence of maternity,” Bydlowski explains, “is partly weakness, loss, deprivation” (*La Dette*, 172). It is not surprising then if in Atwood’s story, the pregnant woman’s physical identity dissolves as she approaches the moment of childbirth, as she feels first “effete” (*DG*, 234), then “purblind” (*DG*, 234), and finally “transparent” (*DG*, 239). The body of the laboring woman is a “faceless body” (*DG*, 225), a body devoid of distinctiveness. Time escapes her, as does her sense of reality, and her mind is blurred to the point that “she can’t remember why she wanted to have a baby in the first place” (*DG*, 235). This dissolution of identity accompanies the desertion of words: “When there is pain, she feels nothing because there is no she. This finally is the disappearance of language” (*DG*, 237). This debilitating process deprives Jeanie of the “mystery” and “vision” she is expecting to encounter in the act of giving birth.

Likewise, the experience of language, words, and writing has to do with mourning and loss. In “Giving Birth” the first loss the writer has to mourn is the inadequacy of language, for the story of the alienating side of mothering may well be an untellable story: “The word in English for unwanted intercourse is rape, but there is no word in the language for what is about to happen to this woman” (*DG*, 230). Atwood’s narrator acknowledges the existential fault of language—what she calls “the problem about language” (*DG*, 226)—which is an inadequate medium to describe the very “event” of giving birth. She, like the narrator, has to face the problem of expressing the “indescribable events of the body” (*DG*, 235). “These are the only words I have, I’m stuck with them, stuck in them” (*DG*, 226), she stoically observes like a voice in a monologue by Samuel Beckett. Words

and phrases, when not absent, are felt to be arbitrary, not connected to the obscure reality of thought and experience. The indirect language of metaphor is summoned to help suggest an event lying beyond words, words which remain monstrously, grotesquely approximate: “a belly like a knotted fist, squeezing” (*DG*, 225); “the baby is enormous, a stone, a boulder, her bones unlock, and, once, twice, the third time, she opens like a birdcage turning slowly inside out. A pause, a wet kitten slithers between her legs” (*DG*, 239). “Thus is language,” the narrator asserts, “muttering in its archaic tongues of something” (*DG*, 225).

Moreover, writing has to do with the act of filling in a void, an absence. French psychoanalyst and literary critic André Green believes that writing is based on a wound, a death that the work of art will transform into a positive entity (57). What is more, “reading and writing are uninterrupted works of mourning” (57), as the reader is always absent for the writer, and vice versa, the writer absent for the reader. According to Green, a “writer is trapped between his double and absence: his writer’s double, who reveals another image of himself [. . .], belongs to another world; the one who emerges from silence and goes back into silence is absent” (62). In “Giving Birth,” writing and reading are, in the narrator’s words, a creation of “wraiths, echoes, reverberations in your own brain” (*DG*, 228); the first-person narrator explains the work of creation as a way to bring back to life distant memories:

By this time you may be thinking that I’ve invented Jeanie in order to distance myself from these experiences. Nothing could be further from the truth. I am in fact, trying to bring myself closer to something that time has already made distant. As for Jeanie, my intention is simple: I am bringing her back to life.

(*DG*, 229)

Jeanie is a “ghost,” like “Betty,” the “mysterious” long-dead eponymous character of another first-person narrator story of *Dancing Girls* to whom the narrator dedicates her story (*DG*, 50).

The analogy between the creative power of language and that of the female body is further worked out in the story’s imagery. Giving birth is like being trapped in a “dark place, which is not hell, which is more like being inside trying to get out” (*DG*, 237). Likewise, language is “rich and sticky”:

This is why so many have disappeared beneath its dark surface, why you should never try to see your own reflection in it; you will lean over too far, a strand of your hair will fall in and come out gold, and thinking it

is gold all the way down, you yourself will follow, sliding into those outstretched arms, towards the mouth you think is opening to pronounce your name but instead, just before your ears fill with pure sound, will form a word you have never heard before.

(*DG*, 228)

The mouth of language swallowing up the persona is a huge vagina into which the self is lost, but also transformed, thanks to the unconscious alchemy of words, in what finally appears to be a miraculously revivifying process. The same miracle is expected when Atwood's mask teaches her daughter to name things; she believes the child's first word "will be miraculous, something that has never yet been said" (*DG*, 226). Eventually, a new level of articulate speech is achieved by Jeanie as she "becomes drifted over with new words" (*DG*, 240), and a new visionary quality—at first negated—is eventually mentioned, while reality is transformed in Jeanie's new maternal eye, an old stone building becoming like a living baby:

All she can see from the window is a building. It's an old stone building, heavy and Victorian, with a copper roof oxidized to green. It's solid, hard, darkened by soot, dour, leaden. But as she looks at this building, so old and immutable, she sees that it is made of water. Water and some tenuous jellylike substance. Light flows through it from behind (the sun is coming up), the building is so thin, so fragile, that it quivers in the slight dawn wind. Jeanie sees that if the building is this way (a touch could destroy it, a ripple of the earth, why has no one noticed, guarded it against accidents?) then the rest of the world must be like this too, the entire earth, the rocks, people, trees, everything needs to be protected, cared for, tended.

(*DG*, 240)

She is now able to "connect" stone and water, the mineral world and the liquid world, things that remained disconnected, in a modernist stance reminiscent of E. M. Forster's famous epigraph to *Howard's End*. It is as if Jeanie had finally been psychologically reborn: she is like a child, discovering the world in an innocent, untouched way. And, unsurprisingly, the conclusion, like a positive Joycean epiphany, describes the psychological birth of this new Eve, Jeanie, who "ceases to be what she was and is replaced, gradually, by someone else" (*DG*, 240). Still unsurprisingly, it is finally the birth of the persona that has taken place: "(It was to me, after all, that the birth was given, Jeanie gave it, I am the result.)" (*DG*, 239). Once again, this statement is suspended in one of Atwood's cherished parentheses, like another ironic denial of its primary status.

Eventually, the question the reader asks after reading "Giving Birth" is, To what extent should Atwood be taken seriously? Irony and humor are everywhere present in this story, a true-to-life, postmodern tale. Many a postmodernist topos is exploited in "Giving Birth": its "serious levity" toward the literary genres and masters of the past, its metafictional tendency, its deconstruction of "master narratives." Further, its rejection of rigid genres and its predilection for pastiche and parody is typically postmodern. "Giving Birth" lies somewhere between nonfiction and fiction. Structurally, the embedded story follows the lines of the romantic quest. It reads like a perfect bildungsroman with its numerous peripeteia, where childbirth is worked out both as an "ordeal" and a tale of "initiation" with its subject (Jeanie) and object (the baby), its helpers—the shadowy woman who has "seen her through" (DG, 240)—and its opponents—among whom is the ogre-like figure of the big green foreign nurse. But "Giving Birth" resembles many other genres: first, it has to do with the personal diary, the literary memoir, the handbook for pregnant women, while also leaning toward fairy tales, ghost stories, and mystery stories. The hospital ward reminds us of the setting of a science fiction novel, the doctor looks very much "like Mary Poppins" (DG, 238). Forster, Joyce, Beckett—many literary forefathers are parodied or alluded to in "Giving Birth." Second, as already mentioned, "Giving Birth" is self-reflexive throughout, brooding over writing and language in a more or less down-to-earth way. The continual game that is being played on the suspension of disbelief, on the gap between real life and fiction, points to the artificiality of the medium and enjoins us to reflect on the working of literature, creation, and creativity. Additionally, a reflection on the performative function of language is present throughout the story. Language is literally "giv[ing] a performance" (DG, 229). Thirdly, Atwood plays with the postmodern trend toward ambiguity and the blurring of identities and concepts, as in her title, which refers both to the story and the physical act. She dramatizes the fact that the subject of the writer is split in the act of writing, but creation takes place when the limits between persona and author are blurred, when the mask is inserted between reality and fiction.

For, as Atwood explains in "Negotiating with the Dead," the "act of writing takes place at the moment when Alice passes through the mirror. At this one instant, the glass barrier between the doubles dissolves, and Alice is neither here nor there, neither art nor life" (57). One world bleeds into the other, so that the gap between life and fiction, reality and imagination, dream and wakefulness, is no longer

valid. Everything takes place as in the “nebulous effects of cloud” of the “Turner sunsets” that Atwood evokes in her story (*DG*, 228). Finally, the aforementioned nebulousness creates the text itself, with its mixture of tones, styles, and mannerisms, both “realistic in detail and slightly sentimental” like the “Dutch genre painting” the narrator is commenting upon (*DG*, 227). The elaborate lyricism of dream-like pieces is balanced by the more cynical, demystifying notes about giving birth in a constraining, infantilizing environment. Still, there is a baroque “refinement” in the “ornamented circus numbers red with gold filigree and dots” of Jeanie’s imagination (*DG*, 228), and in the orchestrated complexities of Atwood’s story.

Finally, values are playfully turned upside down and dismissed in what becomes a meaningless and arbitrary world. The solemnity of naming in a godlike fashion, or of baptizing in a priestlike way, is discredited when the reader understands Jeanie is named after an Elton John song, which seems to put pop culture on the same level as the sacred text of the Genesis. There is something playfully grotesque in the narrator’s imagination, as in the “image of the tiny pink nurse, ant-like, trundling large Jeanie through the corridors, rolling her along like a heavy beach ball” (*DG*, 234). Even when reality is rendered marvelous by the working of language, it is debunked one way or the other, as in the humorous sacredness of “the mysterious white altar of the toilet” (*DG*, 226), or when the narrator is anxious to see the feet of her daughter reappear in her diapers, or when trying to read an Agatha Christie novel during labor, Jeanie’s mind is led to draw nonsensical comparisons: “There is no connection between Poirot and her labour, which is now intensifying, unless it is the egg-shape of Poirot’s head and the vegetable marrows he is known to cultivate with strands of wet wool (placenta? umbilical cords?)” (*DG*, 233). The experience of giving birth is not to be taken at face value either: there is something very absurdly Bridget Jones-like in Jeanie’s way of facing it. She intends to thwart the lethal danger of childbirth thanks to ludicrously harmless lemon “Life Savers” (*DG*, 229, 234) or to a talisman destined for Turkish mules even though she “knows this talisman probably won’t work for her, she is not Turkish and she isn’t a mule” (*DG*, 234).

In the end, one wonders if this story is not something other than just a postmodern tale, if it is not more of a *mise en abyme* of postmodernism as such, as an allegory of the postmodernist deconstructive drive itself, showing how art self-consciously plays with nonsense in the twentieth century. So, is Atwood stating through her devastating irony, through all her baroque mannerisms and postmodern games, that the maternal issue in feminine creativity, or the “weak-enough

mother myth," should be dismissed as yet another grand narrative making claims to yet another universal truth or concept? That the feminist "mother/daughter/death" trinity of Atwood's story should be shelved as too imperialistically reasonable?

All things considered, she may not be going as far as saying that women are meant to be the new visionaries of modern times, nor that they are definitely the creators per se because of their capacity to procreate; but since the "creation/procreation/destruction" trinity has been further developed by Atwood in several of her novels—namely in *Surfacing*, *A Handmaid's Tale*, *Alias Grace*, and, more recently, in *The Blind Assassin*—I assume it should not be discarded too hastily. These works fictionalize women narrators who, because they are deprived of their mothers, or of their children, or because they face the atrocities of illegal abortion, for instance, are led to write their own stories, to reconstruct the past in their own ways, making mininarratives into grand ones and vice versa.

Writing, Atwood seems to be saying, has to make do with contradictions, accepting the need to bring to light a new founding myth, in place of the founding myths inherited from a patriarchal society, but a myth that has to be constantly retold for fear of being unheard. This is a myth which exists not as a transcendent entity, but in its numerous, immanent realizations, in these infinite "Affaires de femmes" to quote the title of a famous film by the French director Claude Chabrol (about an illegal abortionist under the Vichy regime). In this, Atwood's stance is as baroque as her style and inspiration in "Giving Birth," for there is a form of indecisiveness in Atwood's stories that corresponds to Eugenio d'Ors's definition of Baroque aesthetics lying in the reunion of opposing intents, in the "flout[ing]" of "the demands of the principle of contradiction" (29).

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CHAPTER 10



FEMALE VOICES, MALE LISTENERS: IDENTIFYING GENDER IN THE POETRY OF ANNE SEXTON AND WANDA COLEMAN

Ian Williams

At first glance, Anne Sexton and Wanda Coleman seem an odd pair to discuss together. Sexton was a suburban poet; Coleman, urban. Sexton wrote from the east coast; Coleman from the west. Sexton was a white, middle-class poet; Coleman, black and economically disadvantaged. Sexton is best known as a confessional poet, while Coleman's work defies easy categorization, except in the vagaries of postmodernism. Perhaps the only major feature that they have in common is their gender and their unflinching commitment to write about it, which might tempt the opportunist to read their poetry as anguished portrayals of the suffering female voice.

But what is a female voice? Who hears it? We will roam through Sexton's oeuvre as necessary to investigate these questions, and supplement our discussion with Coleman's *Mad Dog Black Lady*. As we broach our subject, we are confronted by the difficulty of defining voice. When reviewers rave about a new American voice, they really mean to announce a new American poet. Thus, the term has come to have a general, vague application in criticism and classrooms as poet, or sometimes style (Martin). But when I speak of voice here, I refer to an identity or presence that makes itself known through the

arrangement and denotative properties of language. Just as a physical voice can identify an individual, often conjuring her body from absence, textual voice similarly marks the poet's singular identity. The word "identity" is key and should retain all of the politics of physical features (gender, race, age), social status, and class.

When we speak of the voices of Coleman and Sexton, we must also speak of their audiences, because voices are activated by recipients. The audibility of a voice depends on the sensitivity of the audience's ear, and a poet may pitch her voice both to an ostensible, implied audience and to an actual one. John Stuart Mill may disagree with my vision of a deliberating, if not calculating, author, but he recognizes that poetry may reach a segment of the audience that is not clearly implied in the work. He writes, "Eloquence is heard, poetry is overheard. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener" (12). Phillip Brian Harper takes Mill's idea and adapts it to explain Black Arts Poetry in the 1960s, claiming that such poetry is meant to be heard by a black audience, but overheard by a white one (234–550). I wonder if the idea could sustain a third application, this time in terms of gender: Is the female voice only meant to be overheard by men, or do men, in fact, comprise most of the immediate listening audience?

The female voice is often aligned with revolt, as much a product of the poet's mouth as the audience's ear. In other words, revolt is both a breach of poetic decorum and a clash of ideologies between the (female) poet and the (male) reader. Sexton and Coleman position their speakers to resist patriarchal social and literary conventions, as if a female identity were predicated on the resistance, the upheaval, of a male tradition. Yet the frustration and anger of their voices partly result from being caught in an inescapable tradition—heard, overheard, looked at, overlooked, examined, cross-examined, and criticized by men. Theorizing the poetics of voice in the work of Sexton and Coleman demands an interrogation of the ubiquitous male audience as it attends to the staged, counterdiscursive performance of female textual identity.

The ways of using print that feel "natural" to a poet, that come to be regarded as her voice, are primarily chosen, and partly inherited. Are there ways of knowing the gender or race of a poet from what appears on the page? Writing a female identity into a text—a neutral space—is of great importance to Sexton and Coleman. But it is not natural. The word "natural" suggests innate, almost biological, differences in voice. Sex may be biological, but gender is constructed, or

performative, to quote Judith Butler (25). The same is true in textual terms: a female identity in print is constructed, and can be formed by a male or a female author.

Kristeva distinguishes between semiotic and symbolic drives in literature, offering this explanation of semiotic rhythm: "Indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation; it is musical, anterior to judgment, but restrained by a single guarantee" (29). Although Kristeva ascribes genders to the terms *symbolic* and *semiotic*, she suggests that such gendering is metaphoric by citing male writers, most often Joyce and Mallarmé, as key practitioners of semiotic expression (15, 88; my emphases). Men are capable of semiotic writing.

In "Sorties," Hélène Cixous, the key proponent of *écriture féminine*, admits the difficulty with defining feminine writing: "defining a feminine practice of writing is impossible with an impossibility that will continue; for this practice will never be able to be theorized, enclosed, coded, which does not mean it does not exist" (92). Surrendering control to the body allows the unconscious to be vocalized. Feminine writing is outside of male discourse, according to Cixous, unable to be expressed or sublimated in the form of Kristeva's concept of ordered, symbolic language. It resists the valuable "masculine" attributes of syntax, explanation, interpretation, and localization (96). Yet, even for Cixous, femininity is somewhat metaphorical, a quality that is also available to men (81).

Écriture féminine presents a bit of a theoretical bog (even Cixous realizes this), prompting me to approach the idea of feminine writing, or feminine voice, from another angle—through orality. The poetry of Coleman and Sexton is especially suited to performance (with all the artificial staging and doubling of consciousness that performance implies) precisely because the poets incorporate oral conventions into their work. But the orality of their printed texts can easily cause misunderstandings by readers who equate poetry with print. The orality of the voices of Coleman and Sexton makes their textual identity more dependent on context than it would otherwise be, thereby reinvesting in the body of the performer as the primary contextual factor. Print has the ability to be decontextualized, but when orality is entrenched into print, the situational aspects of voice cannot be removed if the poetry is to have any meaning. Specifically in Coleman's case, for instance, an utterance typically gains additional meaning when it is understood to issue from a black or female presence. Oral utterances are bound to context; they reply to (implied) questions, and respond

to tacit understandings between speaker and listener. On the other hand, as Michael Presnell points out, topics that belong to the history of print “are linearly developed and hierarchically ordered”; they rely on intratextual cues for interpretation and can be abstracted from their original situation and still have meaning. The male values of reason, hierarchy, and structure naturally elevate print above Sexton’s and Coleman’s values on orality and performance.

Orally, male and female voices have different physical properties, and are generally easy to identify. But textual voice is not merely a transcription of a poet’s patterns of speech, which means that it is not necessary to hear a poet’s physical voice in order to understand her textual voice. The conventions of speech and writing are too different; the voice that a poet creates for herself is by choice, not by biology. Earlier I claimed that the voice is partly inherited, which might suggest some biological tradition. I was speaking there of a poetic tradition or inheritance, and here of the physical female body. Many linguists confirm that other factors besides biology, such as socialization, distinguish male speech from female speech (cf. Sadker and Sadker). They identify a number of differences between genders, some of which have become stereotypes: girls speak of emotions, while boys seek power and independence (Barth and Kinder; Maltz and Borker); boys swear more than girls (Jay); girls are more likely to quote the speech of others when relaying narratives (Ely and McCabe). In terms of writing, girls tend to do better on literacy tests of reading, writing, and spelling than boys (Swann). In terms of communicating stories, Presnell draws attention to the fact that women and men perform and interpret narratives differently (119). The significant differences between the oral communication of men and women are in their choices of content and the arrangement of language (Pearson). Even linguists pay less attention to obvious physical differences, such as pitch.

The same is true for textual voice. The page cancels out physical differences, which means that the content and arrangement of language become identifying markers of gender. One writes gender upon the page’s neutral slate, so that writing (and performing) the female body has little to do with maintaining the vocal integrity of the writer, but is a semantic re-creation of the body. An argument could be made that historically the page has been male, but the explosion of writing in recent centuries by faceless, nameless presences (in advertising and the Internet, for example) once again restores the inherent property of writing as anonymous.

Sexton is certainly interested in poetically exploring what it means to be a woman, which often takes the familiar, if unfortunate, course

of distinguishing the female experience from the male. Coleman's textual identity is also grounded in her gender, but she adds another factor, her race. She will not allow us to forget how being black and female determines her perspective on the world. There are blatant examples of how both poets create a female voice by performing gender. In "Menstruation at Forty," Sexton speaks frankly about the biology of being a woman. Her hopes for a son are disappointed: "All this without you— / two days gone in blood" (30–31). In response, one male reviewer writes, "Only a woman alone, in the physiological sense, could have written a poem like 'Menstruation at Forty'" (McDonnell, 136).

Coleman can write even more explicitly of menstruation in "Doing Battle with the Wolf" because of the pioneering work of writers like Sexton:

i drip blood for hours
 go to the bathroom and apply bandages
 i've bled enough
 it's my monthly bleeding of poison.
 (26–29)

This kind of private experience, known intimately only by women, genders the page. Menstruation is a topic that is generally off limits for male writers, whether because of modesty, censure from militant feminist critics, or the fear of being inauthentic.

We are seeing that the aspects of voice that involve identity are determined in opposition to other, foreign identities, so that bodily parts and experiences that are not shared by both genders become important markers of uniqueness. A defining feature of Coleman's voice is its insistence on saying what men will not or cannot say. Her voice is inimitably her own in the sense that certain audiences can neither utter nor repeat her articulations without discomfort. Too upsetting and too specific a case of exploitation is expressed for the audience to mistake Coleman for another poet, and her unapologetic breaches of poetic decorum act as large quotation marks, distinguishing her experience from the audience's. Gaining authority by saying what should not be said is the prerogative of contemporary poets. True, the urbane, socially conscious reader has already encountered details of oppressive sexist or racial experiences in journalism, art, media, gossip, and orally transmitted legends. The details belong to a larger bank of social information. Thus, the information itself is not surprising, but its location is. Finding prostitution and ghetto life in

poetry, delivered through a mixture of black American vernacular and Standard English, aggregate into a singular voice in poetry, but not necessarily in the oral world. In the lyrics of rap music, for example, race and gender relations are recurring subjects. The ubiquity of the subject almost nullifies the individuality of the rapper. The point becomes clear when one attempts to read Coleman's poetry aloud to a conservative audience, or, worse, to quote her words, to commit her words to paper, within the context of one's own words. Strewn across Coleman's work (or littering it, depending on one's point of view) are potentially offensive words such as *niggah*, *dyke*, *pimpmobiles*, *nappy*, *pickaninnies*, *piis*, and several variations on sexual organs. One realizes how uncomfortable it is to blend Coleman's words with one's own, and it is this marked distinction between self and other—specifically, the audience's reservations to being an accomplice to Coleman's kind of language and experience—that separates her voice from other voices, and from our own.

Readers of Sexton's poetry also face challenges to their propriety. The male critic Richard Morton, for example, is so discomfited by Sexton's vocabulary that he refuses to repeat it unless absolutely necessary. He repeats the title, "The Fury of Cocks," safely distanced from his own voice by the quotation marks requisite of the poem's title (107). Later he introduces his own quotation marks solely for the purpose of lifting the offensive word from his own vocabulary: "On the other hand, the comic piece on 'cocks' is something of a bawdy triumph" (108). He tempers his opinion of its success ("something of a," "bawdy") because his evaluation of the subject matter, of course, pronounces his own tastes as a critic to his audience. Thus, he avoids the word, at one point using periphrasis to avoid naming it directly: "The slang term for the male organ serves to reduce it to a commonplace object" (108). Amusing as his nervousness is, Morton himself is aware that there is something "uneasy" about the poem (108), although, interestingly, he locates this uneasiness in the poem's relation to another poem, and not to himself. Here, his nervousness may partly result from being male, and partly from the authority with which Sexton discusses the male organ. He is on the losing side of an irony, for women now speak freely of their own bodies as well as the bodies of men, but men are only comfortable with (only permitted perhaps) their own bodies for material.

The relationship between female voices and male listeners is troubled because of the long history of male tyranny in determining acceptable poetic production. Although contemporary female writers

speak fearlessly of traditionally unspeakable subjects, they do not take for granted their right to speak or to have a voice. They often react against a perceived muzzle, wielded by male critics or mainstream criticism, that threatens to diminish or silence their work altogether. I need not be so careful to separate male critical theory from mainstream criticism, as they have historically been synonymous. To discuss “male listeners,” as my title proposes, is to implicate the entire reading public, both male and female, because the words designate a group indoctrinated according to an established patriarchal system of reading/listening. Conceptually echoing Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter defines male critical theory as “a concept of creativity, literary history, or literary interpretation based entirely on male experience and put forward as universal” (21). The nervousness that male critical theory exhibits concerning what women say betrays a more fundamental problem; namely, the unexplored ethos of the female speaker, or, said differently, the fact that women are voicing at all. And as an actual muzzle prevents eating and biting, the metaphoric muzzle prevents not only expression, but also interaction (the hand to the mouth) and violence (the mouth to the hand). Kristeva writes of “semiotic violence” (79), which produces *jouissance*, or the “cracking of the socio-symbolic order, splitting it open, changing vocabulary, syntax, the word itself” (79–80).

Showalter and Kristeva are only two of numerous feminists who have enumerated the tyranny of the male audience that determines the acceptable reception of poetry produced by female poets. In the field of communication studies, Catherine Dobris lists three ways in which traditional, patriarchal criticism fails women. First, it does not respect female value systems. For example, males measure success by the end of a task, while women place value on the process (149). Sexton makes a point of leaving evidence of the creative and editorial processes in her work. But these linguistic patterns of articulation and rearticulation, which contribute to defining her voice, are not viewed as successful in a male value system. The series of parallel clauses that revisit a single idea, piling metaphor on metaphor without choosing (the best) one, hesitations that are never overcome—these are ways that cause Sexton’s poems to appear unfinished and unedited. But Sexton’s value system, increasingly throughout her career, lies in the creative process rather than the creative result.

The second way in which traditional criticism fails female writers is the result of a patriarchal society, which, as Dobris finds, “translates into a bias against women both as creators (e.g., authors, orators) and

as subjects” (149). She goes on to identify a double bind in which female creators find themselves:

Thus, women may be criticized for choosing childbirth or women’s rights as subject matter, instead of selecting politics or organized sports. Even when women do choose the latter topics, their work is suspect still, since women may be viewed as noncredible sources on “important” topics, or if they are viewed as credible, then their femininity may be at issue.

(149)

Sexton’s male critics, such as Gullans, find her subjects embarrassing because she does not respect the poetic decorum for appropriate subjects that has evolved over centuries of (male) writing. To be fair, female critics do not unanimously approve of her work either. Helen Vendler writes, “As for biology per se, it does not interest poetry, though the feelings solicited by menstruation or masturbation or abortion do” (438). When attention is disproportionately drawn to an unconventional subject (for example, menstruation or suicide), rather than the resulting feeling, the identity of the poet can almost be deduced through a backward process: Is the poem about such and such? Then so-and-so must be writing. In this way, voice can be determined by attending to the subject of a poem.

Finally, male-based criticism cannot fully appreciate female experience because it “does not take female experience, attitudes, values, and beliefs into account” (Dobris, 149). This is really the logical conclusion that follows from the previous two points. Even when the metaphoric muzzle is removed, the male reader seems to have stopped his ears, acknowledging the female speaker with patronizing respect or quiet disrespect. With characteristic insight, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak exposes the tension between speaking from a certain position (speaking as a woman, for example) and being heard by the dominant group. She writes,

The question of “speaking *as*” involves a distancing from oneself. The moment I have to think of the ways in which I will speak as an Indian, or as a feminist, the ways in which I will speak as a woman, what I am doing is trying to generalize myself, make myself a representative, trying to distance myself from some kind of inchoate speaking *as such*. [. . .] But when the card carrying listeners, the hegemonic people, the dominant people, talk about listening to someone “speaking *as*” something or the other, I think *there* one encounters a problem. When *they* want to hear an Indian speaking as an Indian, a Third World woman speaking as a Third

World woman, they cover over the fact of the ignorance that they are allowed to possess, into a kind of homogenization.”

(195)

Embedded in Dobris's denunciation of patriarchal expectations is a desire to understand writers on their own terms that transcends even the differences between male and female. Coleman and Sexton are both female, and while there are similarities in their ways of representing gender, their approaches to femininity require a more comprehensive search of the factors that influence their subjectivities, such as race, economics, marriage, and education. But there is an obvious danger in reading poets idiosyncratically, for there is no end to the factors that separate them from other poets, no end to the number of other voices that constitute their own, no end to the pressures that impact their subjectivities.

We have discussed, but not exhausted, the problems of the male audience, so let us now take a closer look at the female locutor. At times, a female poet may deliberately choose to downplay her gender in order to avoid certain assumptions about poetesses. Plath, for example, was conflicted between being a poetess (the “Poetess of America,” moreover) and a poet. In her journals and poetry we see both sides of her conflict: sometimes she envisions herself as a poetess among a number of female rivals from Sappho to Adrienne Rich (*Journals*, 360), and sometimes she tries to transcend, like a phoenix, the assumptions embedded in the female body (in “Fever 103°,” she writes, “My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats” [53]; see also “Lady Lazarus”). The female poet may do this of her own volition or in submission to the male keepers of the canon. Negating one's gender, however, presupposes an understanding of its distinguishing features. In “Consorting with Angels,” we observe how Sexton defines the female experience:

I was tired of being a woman,
tired of the spoons and the pots,
tired of my mouth and my breasts,
tired of the cosmetics and the silks.

(1-4)

For Sexton, being a woman involves certain responsibilities (2), physical characteristics (3), and performances (4). Not surprisingly, she chooses the body as a distinguishing mark of womanhood, but she is tired of it, and burdened by the demands and ornaments placed on it.

Significantly, the mouth is one of the two physical parts that Sexton lists to define her femininity. The breast is an obvious choice, and in *Love Poems* (1969), she dedicates a whole poem to exploring its sensualities (171–220). The mouth is a curious choice for the other body part because it is not unique to females. What is unique, what Sexton is drawing attention to, is how the mouth acts as a metonym for expression. And this can be a discomfiting vehicle because the mouth also has equally strong associations with other bodily functions. According to Bataille, the mouth “is the most living part,” frightening as the entrance to the body or the exit of violent impulses (59–61). The mouth negotiates between internal and external worlds, so expression, for Sexton, is not simply a civilized matter of speaking, but of devouring and vomiting as well. Here the mouth serves as a manifestation of Kristeva’s “semiotic violence.”

Sexton suggests in “Consorting with Angels” that female expression differs from male expression. In the second stanza of the poem, the speaker tells us of a dream in which gender-neutral, angelic beings appear, “no two made in the same species” (18), and the simile that she uses to clarify their neutrality reads, “each one like a poem obeying itself, / performing God’s functions” (21–22). Whereas in the first stanza, she suggests that expression is gendered (mouth and breasts are paired together), in the second stanza, she states that poetic expression does not depend on gender. Is she being contradictory? Sexton is dealing with two kinds of expression: the mouth in the first stanza represents oral expression, while the nongendered type of expression in the second stanza is poetic or written. Logically, it makes sense that there are physical properties of oral voice that differentiate between the genders, while in print, those physical clues are absent. More than that, when Sexton’s poetry begins to import oral features into writing, it also becomes more bawdy and sexual. This point can easily be observed if one compares the formally sophisticated *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* to the conversational *Transformations*. By admitting a greater degree of tonal informality into the latter collection, Sexton becomes even more daring, venturing beyond the permissible range of poetic topoi and attitudes. Arguably, the joint occurrence may be coincidental, but it seems that by breaking one rule—the division between orality and writing—Sexton inadvertently breaks a number of taboos about what can be imported into writing. Thus, subjects that could not be comfortably written about, but could be spoken in confidence, infiltrate her poetry. To state the irony in brief, Sexton writes what ought to be said and not what ought to be written.

“Consorting with Angels” continues to exemplify the neutral, androgynous state of being that Sexton romanticizes, but her idealization of asexuality runs into problems. To be precise, the word “androgyny” denotes both male and female genders, as opposed to “asexuality,” which denotes being devoid of sexuality. Each term offers a unique angle on the poem, so I will let them float through our discussion. The poem moves from the mundane spoons and pots of 1960s female existence to a dream world, as we just observed. In the dream itself, the speaker is transported to the New Jerusalem, and physically positioned between Adam and Eve (29–30). Appropriately written in first person, using a gender-neutral pronoun, the speaker says: “I was not a woman anymore / not one thing or the other” (34–5). But she cannot sustain this world of fantasy, nor extend its ramifications to others outside of herself. Immediately after supposedly relinquishing her gender, she addresses the “daughters of Jerusalem” (36), and falls into an archaic gender role: “the king has brought me into his chamber” (37). But, catching herself, she again gives up her identity in a passage that echoes Plath’s dissolution in poems like “Lady Lazarus” and “Ariel”:

I’ve been opened and undressed.
 I have no arms or legs.
 I’m all one skin like a fish.
 I’m no more a woman
 than Christ was a man.

(39–43)

Gender neutrality seems a difficult concept for Sexton to believe in completely. The speaker occupies no fixed state, neither male, female, nor neutral, but moves between them all. While it is impossible for the speaker to be asexual or androgynous, Sexton, as a poet, has the rightful authority to adopt any role that she wishes, simply by assuming the disguise of a speaker. Thus, “Consorting with Angels” fulfills the desire for androgyny, only through art, by narrating the preparatory processes for writing, a process of becoming disembodied in order to be incarnated in another form.

If writing is disembodied, androgynous, or neutral (Barthes, 142), then how do we explain the efforts made to promote women’s writing or specific branches of ethnic literatures, such as African American writing, in recent decades? We could answer this question in terms of content and form, although we realize that such a division is often illusory. The subject concerns of traditionally marginalized groups

differ from those typically represented in Anglo male discourse. A female thinks about and represents her body with a subjectivity that is alien to a male. Sexton's frankness about female biology offends some male critics (cf. Hughes), and Coleman can write neither of her own female body nor of a male body—though she boldly does anyway—without offending some parties. These poets' positions as women, writing about what they know and what they should not know, upset centuries of male scopophilia. Put simply, the promoters of minority subjectivities are primarily concerned with the minority experience as revealed through the content of a poet's work.

Indeed, the concerns of female poets often differ from male poets, and, consequently, the reactions of audiences differ accordingly. But is there some quality in the use of written language, the form of poetry that marks a difference between genders? Linguistically, we can tell the speaker's gender by how she orients herself in relation to the other gender and to her own. Coleman's prose poem, "Blind Betty," narrates a parasitic friendship between two women, the first-person speaker and Betty, who "always pretended she couldn't see me when i knew that she could" (41). The name Betty and the corresponding third-person female pronouns *she* and *her* easily identify the gender of the speaker's friend. The speaker's gender and race are defined in relation to Betty's:

perhaps it was 'cause i looked so much like her after the
very first glance she felt i no longer bore examination—it
isn't necessary to stare at one's mirror image. one begins
to think strange thoughts.

blind betty and i were both black, almost the same skin
tone except that hers ran to yellow and mine ran to red. blind
betty wasn't as tall as i, physically.

(41)

Towards the conclusion of the poem, the speaker's gender becomes unmistakable as she describes her clothing and the reactions, both female and male, to the display of her body:

so one day, when me and blind betty went to breakfast with
her gentleman friend, i took off my blouse and bra. blind betty
saw me. she let me know in no uncertain terms that she saw
me. she didn't like what she saw. her gentleman friend proffered
no opinion.

(41)

The speaker's gender is not always difficult to discern, as the self is defined through a series of relations to other genders. It becomes more difficult when a first-person speaker, *I*, is defined against a neutral second-person pronoun, *you*. In such cases, the type of interaction that we witness between the roles suggests the gender of *I* and *you*. Admittedly, the assumptions that we bring to ambiguous pronouns have been challenged, so we are less confident to pronounce genders on speakers than in the past (cf. Capecchi; Costello; Green and LeBihan).

But we have slipped. We have been identifying the gender of the speaker. How can we identify the gender of the poet? Typically, instinctively, we look for the name on the cover, and unless some clue within the text disrupts our assumption, we are inclined to think that the speaker's gender matches the author's. For example, we learn that the main speaker of Sexton's "The Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts" is male because he defines himself by his wife and female lover. When the speaker of "In the Deep Museum" parodies a line from the gospels, we realize that he is, in fact, Christ. The process of determination also works in the opposite direction: if all the speakers in a collection define themselves against other presences as female, then we assume a single female voice from which the others issue polyphonically.

In the cases of Coleman and Sexton, the female voice is characterized by its relation to a male voice—a point from which deconstructionists can launch an attack. The docility and silence that women have been encouraged to imitate in past centuries are inverted so that the contemporary female voice is aggressive but not violently so, pitched loud but not hysterical, as interested in itself as it is in the male tradition. The female voice challenges assumptions about language and power and delights in tropes that reverse, parody, ironize, undermine, contrast, defy, and resist.

Female poets can often be identified, as they exhaust language with such rhetorical devices, but there is nothing inherently gendered about parody, irony, or any of the other tropes. As mentioned previously, Kristeva often cites male avant-garde writers as exemplars of "semiotic violence" (79). Our ways of talking about textual tension only imitate a revolution in history, as women resist and reinvent ordered language in the same way that they resisted a patriarchal social system. The feminine voice is so labeled because it reflects the principles of feminist revolution. It is only a metonym, or if one believes in the power of poetry to effect political change, a synecdoche.

More specifically, one of the ways in which a female voice defines itself against a male one is in anger toward (not necessarily rejection of)

male figures, voices, presences, and dominant ways of using language and choosing subjects. The female voice insists on projecting itself with the understanding that it is, was, or will be misunderstood. The female textual presence is often synonymous with disorder. Kristeva's concept of semiotic language as "unfettered" and "irreducible" regards nonsense and word play as feminine textual features (29). Poetry, indeed all art—"this semiotization of the symbolic" (79)—works within and against social order: it is "the ultimate means of transformation or subversion, the precondition for its survival and revolution" (81).

To answer an earlier question more directly: the effort to encourage female and minority voices is a gesture of listening to dissenting groups, voices that snicker so loudly at history that they disrupt it. It is no coincidence that feminism and postmodernism coincide historically as they both share principles of revision and reconsideration. By now I hope the irony is apparent: the female voice, notorious for its resistance to formulaic, patriarchal discourse, could just as easily be called the postmodern voice. The dominant voice of our age is female. Many men have spoken with it. Men in almost every school of poetry, small and large, leave us evidence of this voice: in Allen Ginsberg's and the Beat poets' examination of alternative lifestyles; in the bold rhetorical provocations of African American poets, such as Imamu Amiri Baraka; in the playfulness of Barrie Phillip Nichol (bpNichol) and other male language poets; even in the New York school's Kenneth Koch's rewritings of canonical poems.

Schemes of repetition and tropes that reflect and distort are at the core of poetry by Sexton and Coleman. Earlier, while discussing Dobris's first objection to traditional, patriarchal criticism, we noticed that Sexton's voice is defined by an urge to repeat, and to leave evidence of the process in the final result. Her favorite device is anaphora, the repetition of the initial words of successive clauses. The device compensates for a rejection of conventional formal structure by attempting to organize language in predictable but flexible ways. In "The Fury of Sundays," anaphora organizes a series of similes:

The sun as red as the cop car siren
 The sun as red as the algebra marks.
 The sun as red as two electric eyeballs.
 (375)

Anaphora qualifies the comparisons. It is not used to create the harmony of parallelism, but to revise comparisons that Sexton finds unsuitable.

She records a number of possibilities, without choosing the best one, so the poem loses its linearity. The effect is of phrases under erasure, edited, revised, but not erased. The poem retains the imperfections from the process of writing.

Coleman uses a greater variety of repetitive structures than Sexton, including refrains, variations of print (italics, for example), and passages set off from the margin to mark a shift in thought or voice. The compulsion to repeat presupposes that one is not heard the first time. As a result, in Sexton's use of anaphora and Coleman's schemes of repetition, there is an element of frustration with the self and the audience. In Coleman's case especially, there is anger at the self for not being audible, and anger at an audience that is perceived as deaf and deliberately so. The refrains in "Wanda in Worryland" change slightly with each repetition, and the simultaneous predictability and variation can produce two opposite reactions.

i have gone after people
with guns
[.]
i have gone after people
with rocks
[.]
i have gone after people
with my fists
[.]
i have gone after people
with poems.
(7-8, 11-12, 15-16, 22-23)

Here the repetitions enable the speaker's shameful confessions to be revealed. Coleman creates her own problem, we see, for confessions require an audience to be half deaf, to pardon without question, or to be completely deaf, which is to refuse the speaker forgiveness. Said differently, depending on the context, repetitive schemes may lull the ear into compliance, and thereby motivate solidarity as the audience's "predictions" turn it into a cocreator with the poet. On the other hand, repetitions can provoke the gentle audience to reject the speaker's insistence, particularly if it means being an accomplice to a speaker's guns, rocks, and fists. Repetitive schemes showcase a persistent unit of language, and, as Michael Thurston writes, political poetry, poetry that makes something happen, provokes change through "radical notions of articulation and rearticulation" (16).

The female voice—which we realize is an artificial construction—articulates and rearticulates until it is heard. It speaks to an audience of listeners trained in a patriarchal system, and therefore shapes its utterances as a response or provocation to a system of thought and articulation. A female voice assumes the existence of a male voice, which is not to say that it is derivative or supplementary, but revolutionary and complementary. Although we exhibit much nervousness about assumption in academic circles, preferring to talk of evidence, in fact assumption is the prerequisite foundation of the subversive techniques of contemporary criticism. It does not necessarily propagate malice and stereotypes, but it educates readers about their own biases, socializations, personal reading decorum, and expectations. Assumptions about gender, based on the voice of the poetry, rightly or wrongly—it hardly matters—reveal more about our cultural constructions and our own subjectivities as we interpret than they do about a poet.

In the same way that cultural and social factors shape identity, they shape textual voice. Assumptions about the world inform our reception of Sexton's and Coleman's voices specifically, and our interpretations of poetic voice in general. If enough females write like this, it becomes the female voice. If enough females react this way, it becomes a female reaction. The danger in this line of thinking becomes clear if I speak in racial terms: if enough blacks speak or dress like this, it becomes a black style. Thus I tender these contributions with the awareness—and strange satisfaction—that they are, inevitably, assumptions of female voice, metaphors, ways of thinking that keep company with unverifiable truths, but are not inherently true themselves.

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