

Selection One

**Mitchell, Sally. *Daily Life in Victorian England, Second Edition.*
Westport: Greenwood, 2009.**

WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT

One of the persistent errors people make about nineteenth century life is to claim that women did not work. This applies only (and even then not entirely) to middle-class and upper-class women; the person who says "Victorian women led idle and luxurious lives" has forgotten about the other three-quarters of the population. In addition to their role as domestic servants and seamstresses, women worked in laundries, retail shops, textile mills, and other factories. Once machines supplied the strength, women's fine-motor skills made them the preferred workers for needlemaking, pengrinding, and many other industrial processes that required quickness and neat work habits.

All in all, women made up about one-third of the regular paid labor force. Poor and working-class women did many jobs that were hard, dirty, and dangerous. Although the Mines and Collieries Act of 1842 ended the practice of using women underground to haul sledges of coal, women continued to work above ground in sorting and loading coal. They worked in brickmaking, chainmaking, and collecting trash from city streets. It was not unusual for women who did heavy and dirty work to wear trousers and appear almost indistinguishable from men in the same trades.

Aside from the major employments-- domestic service, factories, and needlework-- there were dozens and dozens of other ways for women to earn a living. Some of those listed in the census of 1841 include actor, agricultural implement maker, artist, auctioneer, author, baby linen dealer, baker, basket maker, bead maker, blacksmith, boat woman, bonnet maker, bookbinder, brazier, brewer, brick layer, brush and broom maker, butcher, butter dealer, button maker, cap maker, carpenter, carrier, chair maker, charwoman, china dealer, clock maker, clothes dealer, coffee-house keeper, draper, farmer, fish monger, flour dealer, flower maker, gardener, glove maker, greengrocer, gunsmith, haberdasher, hairdresser, hatter, keeper (in a lunatic asylum), lace dealer, laundry worker, leech dealer, livery stable keeper, lodging house keeper, map maker, midwife, milk seller, music seller, nail manufacturer, net maker, newsagent, optician, paper hanger, pastry cook, pawnbroker, pen maker, perfumer, pig dealer, pipe maker, pottery maker, printer, provision dealer, quill cutter, rag dealer, ribbon manufacturer, ropemaker, sack and bag dealer, schoolmistress, scissors maker, shopkeeper, shroud maker, stationer, stay and corset maker, sugar baker, tailor, tape manufacturer, tavern keeper, tobacconist, toll collector, whip maker, wool dealer, yarn manufacturer, and yeast merchant.

In 1885, domestic service remained the largest employment for women and girls, but clerical work and shop work had moved into second place. There were still large numbers of needleworkers and factory workers, but not nearly so many women as in the 1840s were doing agricultural labor.

The true number of women workers was even larger than the census shows, because many married women earned money in ways that went unreported. When a census taker asked for occupation, a married woman generally classified herself as wife even if she also produced income by keeping lodgers, childminding, nursing sick people, taking in laundry, mending, ironing, doing piecework at home, working in the fields during harvest, or doing irregular day work as a cleaner. For married women in the working classes, bringing in some money was an expected part of the housewife's role.

Even in much of the middle class, women contributed to their husbands' success in trade, shopkeeping, or a profession. Except for the most socially prominent physicians, for example, the doctor's wife was often called on to serve as his assistant or to give advice to patients who stopped at the office when the doctor was away on a house call. The scientist's wife might act as note taker and laboratory assistant. The farmer's wife was responsible for the dairy; she supervised the indoor farm servants who made butter and cheese, which often provided a major part of the cash income. In trades and small businesses, the wife might tend shop while the husband saw to production, packing, ordering, and dealing with wholesalers; once they were prosperous enough that she no longer served in the shop, the woman was often the more literate partner and did the bookkeeping and correspondence. [...]

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FAMILY AND PRIVATE LIFE

Family Roles and Relationships

The family-- made up of a father, mother, and children living together-- was increasingly idealized during the Victorian period. People developed firm ideas about how things ought to be, although not everyone could meet these standards. At the same time, real changes in work and income allowed family relationships to develop more fully. In the working class, growing prosperity allowed more space for shared activities and enabled childhood to last longer. Among aristocrats, extended families had formerly promoted economic and political interests rather than encouraging close affectionate ties. But with Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, and their nine children as models, the upper classes now paid more attention to family celebrations and to establishing a public image of closeness and intimacy.

The middle-class family in its private home was central to the new ideology. Middle-class houses were large enough for family activities yet too small for the separate smoking rooms, morning rooms, and children's wings of aristocratic households. Middleclass women could focus their attention on family and children; they did not need to earn money (as did wives in the working class),

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nor did they have the social and political obligations of aristocratic women. The model of mother at home, father at work, and family as the center of children's lives-- the model taken as "natural" for much of the twentieth century-- had its origin in middle-class patterns of life. During the nineteenth century, English middle-class households were less likely to include unrelated persons (except for servants), and grown children lived at home as long as they were single. An unmarried aunt or widowed grandmother might also be in the house.

Ideologically, the middle-class home and family represented the essence of morality, stability, and comfort. The husband had legal and economic control over his wife, children, and servants. The family depended on his income: the wife did not bring in money through labor (as in the working class) or have a private settlement (as among gentry and aristocrats). The children remained subordinate and obedient. Boys, who needed extended schooling to reproduce their parents' style of life, were under their father's authority until they had enough training and experience to make their own way in the world. Middle-class daughters were not expected to "make their own way"-- with a very few exceptions, they stayed at home unless or until they married.

Families influenced one's economic prospects as well as one's affections. Many sons took up their father's occupation. As apprenticeship grew less common in skilled trades, fathers and uncles became an important source of boys' training. Kinship connections helped young men find positions in politics, foreign service, business, medicine, and the church. As late as the 1890s, 40 percent of all clergymen were the sons of clergy.

Extended families were still significant. Working-class girls in their early teens might become part of a married sister's household to help with baby care. Middle-class girls were sent to live with cousins in the city as *sister governesses*. They helped teach the younger children and shared the adults' social life, thus gaining an opportunity to meet more marriageable men than would be found in the country or in a small town.

Most marriages took place between people of the same occupation or social set. The only regular exceptions were women domestic servants, who might marry lower-middle-class tradesmen. Victorians married later than most people imagine. For the country as a whole, the mean age at first marriage was 25 for women and 27 or 28 for men. Members of the working class, on average, married a bit younger; but both men and women of the middle class were often

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older than 30, because a man wanted to be financially established before he took on the support of a family. The marriage age grew increasingly later throughout the century. More than 10 percent of the population as a whole never did marry, and among the professional classes one-third of all women may have remained single.

The average number of children per family was six at midcentury. About one-fifth of all families had 10 or more children. Because of poor nutrition and other dangers, infant deaths were more common in the working class; many of the really large families were found among the middle and upper classes. The situation changed by the end of the century. Families grew smaller, partly because of later marriage but also because reasonably dependable ways to prevent conception were available. The middle class were the first to limit family size, probably because they recognized the expense of educating children so they could equal their parents' economic status. By 1900, the average manual laborer had twice as many children as the typical professional man.

The death rate among adults in their twenties and thirties was relatively high; workplace accidents, childbirth, infections, epidemics, and tuberculosis killed far more people than nowadays. By some estimates, as many children lived in single-parent families in Victorian times as today, although the cause was death rather than divorce or lack of marriage. Whichever parent died, there was hardship. Working women seldom earned enough to support young children; they usually had to go into the workhouse. A father who could not provide child care while working 12 or 14 hours a day might also have to go the Poor Law for help. Children were sent to orphanages or split up among relatives. Among the middle class, an aunt or paid housekeeper would live in a widower's house as a substitute mother; widowed mothers moved in with a relative. Second and third marriages created complicated stepfamilies and half-families. The Victorian "nuclear family" was often, therefore, large and complex, but the rate of birth outside marriage was-- in all classes-- extremely low.

Within the family, all legal authority rested with the father. Nevertheless, as middle-class advice books recognized, fathers who worked in business and the professions spent long hours away from home. Mothers were made responsible for moral and spiritual guidance, as well as for supervising all of the household's practical affairs. Fathers were typically distant and reserved.

Middle-class married women with three or four servants did not have a great deal to do with themselves all day; nor were they rich

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enough for the constant visiting, shopping, and entertaining that occupied women higher on the social scale. Single women had an even more problematic role. Although the barrier was weakening by the end of the century, most people considered it socially unacceptable for any middle-class woman to do paid work. In some circles, a sort of moral barrier even prevented unpaid charitable work; it might expose her to things an unmarried woman should not know. A middle-aged single woman was expected to stay with her parents as long as they remained alive. After that, she might make herself useful as housekeeper to an unmarried brother or as unpaid companion and help to a sister or sister-in-law with a large family. [...]

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GIRLS' EDUCATION

Both social customs and practical circumstances meant that girls were less likely than boys to go to school. Girls did not need preparation for public life. A girl who would grow up to be a married woman like her mother could obtain her vocational training

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at home. Girls in the working classes began their "apprenticeship" very young, by looking after babies and helping their mothers with the laundry or needlework that brought in some of the family's income.

Families in better circumstances saved and sacrificed to give sons an education that would lay the best possible foundation for their adult lives. Daughters were not deliberately neglected, but their

schooling seemed less important. In addition, girls were thought to need more social and moral protection than boys. Parents disliked having them away from home or at large schools. Small neighborhood private schools were run by women who gave lessons in their homes. It was more important for a girl to have personal attention than intellectual training. Best of all, when parents could afford it, was private teaching by a governess in the girl's own home.

The Governess

Although the name *governess* could apply to any woman who taught middle-class or upper-class girls, including those who worked in schools, the term most often describes teachers who instructed children in their homes. A daily governess (usually in a city) came in to give lessons in particular subjects or for part of the day. Resident governesses lived with the family. They taught boys until they were old enough for prep school or public school and girls of any age from infancy through the teens.

The most thoroughly educated Victorian women were probably those who had been taught by their parents. A leisured father who was interested in instructing his daughter, a mother who enjoyed intellectual pursuits, and a well-stocked home library provided a solid grounding in the basics and a lifetime habit of independent learning. Educated women continued to pursue new subjects throughout their adulthood. Studying languages was especially widespread. Many women became thoroughly competent translators by spending an hour or two every day with a dictionary, a grammar, and a substantial book written in another language.

Mothers who did not have the time, the education, or the social confidence to serve as a daughter's primary teacher hired a governess. Like the nanny, the governess was seen as a substitute for the child's mother. Her qualifications were not essentially intellectual. She was expected to be a model of appropriate values and behavior. Moreover, it was important that she have the right social status. The ideal governess was a clergyman's orphan, an officer's widow,

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or some other well-born woman who had been forced (through no fault of her own) to find a means of support

Far too many women wanted to find work as governesses, which kept the pay very low. The resident governess had a safe place to live and some of the comforts to which a woman of her class was accustomed. In theory, the governess was treated as an equal. She had her own bedroom in the children's wing (if her room was in the attic, she at least slept alone instead of sharing a room as servants did). Whereas the nanny was addressed as "Nurse" or "Nanny," the governess was addressed as "Miss Anderson." Nanny called the children "Miss Edith" and "Master Edward"; to the governess they were "Edith" and "Edward."

Her status was nevertheless ambiguous, because she was neither family nor servant. She ate with the children instead of with the adults. Although she was usually invited to join the family in the drawing room after dinner, she might feel uncomfortable about intruding-- yet she also didn't feel at home in the servants' sitting room, especially if some of them resented her education and class standing.

19th Century Novels
Readings for Gender Depictions Assignment

Mothers who interviewed a governess were often more interested in her manner than her teaching ability. They wanted their daughters to acquire some general knowledge-- but largely so they would (as women) be able to carry on pleasant social conversations. Posture, speech, manners, taste, and personal presentation were considered more important than geometry or philosophy. In addition to lessons, a governess provided companionship and supervision for girls and adolescents. This role was especially important when mothers were incapacitated or if they had busy social lives.

If a family was high on the social scale, girls might have a series of governesses. A nursery governess gave early lessons to both boys and girls. At age eight or so, boys went to prep school and a more educated governess began teaching the girls English, history, geography, and conversational French. She also helped them learn to draw, play the piano, and sing-- these skills (known as *accomplishments*) were important both for social life and as a means of lifelong recreation. From about age 14, a girl might have visiting masters (often political refugees from European countries) to give more advanced lessons in art, music, and languages. Finally, in her later teens, she would be sent to a fashionable boarding school or provided with a finishing governess who polished her dancing, conversation, and social graces.

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That pattern was more of an ideal than an actuality. One governess often had (at the same time) a set of pupils ranging from early childhood to middle teens. People in relatively modest circumstances shared a governess; that is, two or three neighbors sent their daughters to have lessons with the governess who lived with one of the families. In addition, governesses were often hired for very short periods and then let go when the family decided to go away for the winter or send a daughter to stay with relatives. Doing without a governess was an obvious economy when money was short; an older sister or aunt would take over the teaching duties.

Anything like an organized sequence of education or coherent curriculum was unlikely under these circumstances. Except for the relatively few girls (including novelist Charlotte Brontë) who attended good schools specifically to improve their qualifications, the quality of teaching rested on what she had learned from her own governess. Autobiographies have amusing passages about the garbled knowledge girls acquired. One governess-taught child wrote down her daily schedule at age eight: piano practice, breakfast, copy books, arithmetic, history, break, geography, poems, dinner, rest, Bible reading, reading aloud from a novel, walk, tea, sewing while listening to someone read aloud. Other governesses depended on catechism-style teachers' manuals. Children memorized a page or two every day and were required to recite the answers to a series of questions in no perceptible order: Which monarch signed the Magna Charta? What are the main products of Brazil? Name a blue flower which has double blossoms. In what year were the Turks turned back at Vienna?

The profession of governess was in decline before the end of the century. By then, good secondary schools for girls were being established as middle-class parents realized that a decent education helped girls as well as boys. Nevertheless, daughters of the aristocracy continued to be taught at home until after World War I. Governesses with good credentials were also hired to go abroad with colonial and military families who wanted their daughters to receive an English education

without sending them home to boarding school. [...]

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MEN AND WOMEN

Ideal Womanhood

More nonsense has probably been written about the feminine ideal than any other aspect of Victorian life. Readers should always remember that moralists don't usually waste their time on a topic unless there are alternative viewpoints. When everyone in a society agrees, the subject is simply not mentioned (e.g., advice columnists do not say, "Never serve dog food to human guests.") Many Victorian essays about women's delicacy and fragility, for example, were written by men who wanted to prevent girls from playing sports, studying Latin and mathematics, or planning to practice medicine when they grew up.

In addition, most stereotyped depictions of woman's role are class-bound; they apply only to a narrow segment of society. This is particularly true of the notion that respectable women could not do any paid work. The strongest complaints about women's frivolity and idleness were voiced by people such as Florence Nightingale, who was definitely not idle and was one of the century's most admired women. Economist Harriet Martineau said she was thankful that her father lost his money so she was "forced" to earn her own living. "A Paris Atelier," an 1866 essay by Dinah Mulock Craik in *Good Words*, turned the stereotype on its head. "Working women in all ranks," she wrote, "from our Queen downwards, are, and ought to be, objects of respect to the entire community."

The most conventional image of the perfect Victorian woman is found in the title of a long poem written by Coventry Patmore: *The Angel in the House*. The pure woman's life was supposed to be entirely centered on the home. She preserved the higher moral values, guarded her husband's conscience, guided her children's training, and helped regenerate society through her daily display of Christianity in action. If she successfully made the home a place of perfect peace, her husband and sons would not want to leave it for an evening's (morally suspect) entertainment elsewhere.

Yet the stereotype contains irreconcilable contradictions. Although the ideal (middle-class) woman was legally subordinate,

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economically dependent, and always obedient to her husband, she was somehow supposed to rule the home. The ideology of separate spheres made her entirely responsible for its comfort, beauty, and morality.

Marriage was seen as woman's natural and expected role: it satisfied her instinctual needs, preserved the species, provided appropriate duties, and protected her from the shocks and dangers of the rude, competitive world. In the privacy of the home, her finer instincts-- sensitivity, self-sacrifice, innate purity-- could have free play. Women had to be kept safe at home; their perfect compliance, obedience, innocence, and refinement would make them too easy to victimize in the competitive

public world. This conservative ideal was encapsulated (partly for ironic purposes) in Alfred Tennyson's 1847 poem *The Princess*:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth;
Man for the sword, and for the needle she;
Man with the head, and woman with the heart;
Man to command, and woman to obey;
All else confusion.

As long as marriage held so central a place in the conception of ideal womanhood, it was not unnatural that women were trained to please men, help children, and suppress their own wants. But given the state of matrimonial law, the decision to marry defined a

WOMEN'S DOMESTIC DUTIES: WHAT GIRLS WERE TAUGHT

Domestic Economy is the science which teaches the right management of the family home.

The rightful home manager is a woman. On her the family depend for food, clothing, cleanliness, and comfort necessary to health; and for the good nursing necessary in sickness. This science, which belongs specially to the education of girls, is of more importance than all the other arts and sciences put together. From well-managed homes go forth happy, healthy, wise, and good men and women, to fill every position in the world.

If a country were made up of such homes, it would be a nation healthy and happy, noble and good, wise and prosperous. The influence and power of girls are, therefore, enormous. *They* have more to do with success or failure, happiness or misery. learning or ignorance, than kings, statesmen, philosophers, philanthropists, and clergymen.

Domestic Economy: A Class-Book for Girls (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1876).

woman's entire future. Marriage established her rank, role, duties, social status, place of residence, economic circumstances, and way of life. It determined her comfort, her physical safety, her children's health, and ultimately-- perhaps-- even her spiritual well-being. And owing to the code of chaperonage, she had to make her decision with very few opportunities to gain firsthand information about her prospective partner.

Advice manuals insisted that good men were chivalrous although they clearly made women responsible for defending their own sexual morality. Public standards for male behavior were, however, growing more strict. During the eighteenth century and through the Regency, upper-class men (including those in the royal family) made no secret of their mistresses and illegitimate children. By the 1840s, respectable men kept quiet about their premarital or extramarital affairs. Journalists and clergymen publicized urban vice-- not because there was more of it, but because they were beginning to see prostitution as a problem rather than a natural feature of life.

Stricter moral standards in the middle classes influenced both the upper classes and the respectable working class. By the end of the period, revelations about extramarital sexuality would cause a man to lose his seat in Parliament. Guides for young women discreetly advised readers to inquire about a prospective husband's personal habits as well as his family's medical history. Alcoholism or

THE SEPARATE SPHERES OF WOMAN AND MAN

The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest whenever war is just, whenever conquest necessary. But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle,-- and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. . . . Her great function is Praise: she enters into no contest, but infallibly adjudges the crown of contest. By her office, and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation. The man, in his rough work in the open world, must encounter all peril and trial:-- to him, therefore, must be the failure, the offence, the inevitable error. . . . But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence. This is the true nature of home-- it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division.

John Ruskin, "Of Queen's Gardens," in *Sesame and Lilies* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1865).

tuberculosis among his relatives was a danger. (Both were thought to be inherited.) Careful readers were made aware that gonorrhea blinded infants passing through the birth canal, that syphilis led to congenital malformations-- and that even though a man might be free of symptoms, there was no cure for either disease.

Some discussions of ideal womanhood insist that a respectable girl should be completely ignorant about sex and sexuality until initiated by her husband on the wedding night. However, unvoiced assumptions about masculine behavior created real dangers for any girl who was

that naïve. Because chaperones were essential to protect innocent girls from assault, it seems evident that men assumed any woman walking alone on the streets was sexually available. *Prudery*-- that is, not talking about sexuality or sexual topics-- was meant to protect people. Explicit novels, sensuous pictures, and exciting dances were repressed because they might awaken sexual desire in young women and young men who were not yet mature enough to take on its responsibilities.

Although marriage was inevitably presented as woman's natural destiny, the intense and frequent repetitions of the message should make us suspect that it was not universally accepted. There were more women in their twenties and thirties than men to marry them (largely because of male emigration and colonial service), but not all single women were unhappy old maids. In the working classes, women in well-paid trades were more apt to remain single than those whose earnings were too low to provide adequate support. Among the middle and upper classes, too, it was quite possible for women to earn decent incomes and live contented independent lives.

REFORMING A HUSBAND

Do not delude yourself that, when you have married him, you will be able to reform a lover who has been an evil liver. He will be older than you, and his habits more confirmed. The probability is, that even if he did leave off his bad propensities for a time to please you, they would be returned to again. Rather make up your mind, that as you find him, so, if you take him, you will have to keep him. This especially applies to a man who drinks to excess or habitually nips. If you marry a man whom you know beforehand to be an inveterate smoker, it will be scarcely fair to complain later of his reeking of smoke!

Lady Bellairs, *Gossips with Girls and Maidens, Betrothed and Free* (London: Blackwood, 1887).

Selection Two

**Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination, Second Edition.* 1979.
New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.**

In her brilliant and influential analysis of the question “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” the anthropologist Sherry Ortner notes that in every society “the psychic mode associated with women seems to stand at both the bottom and the top of the scale of human modes of relating.” Attempting to account for this “symbolic ambiguity,” Ortner explains “both the subversive feminine symbols (witches, evil eye, menstrual pollution, castrating mothers) and the feminine symbols of transcendence (mother goddesses, merciful dispensers of salvation, female symbols of justice)” by pointing out that women “can appear from certain points of view to stand both under and over (but really simply outside of) the sphere of culture’s hegemony¹.” That is, precisely because a woman is denied the autonomy-- the subjectivity-- that the pen represents, she is not only excluded from culture (whose emblem might well be the pen) but she also becomes herself an embodiment of just those extremes of mysterious and intransigent Otherness which culture confronts with worship or fear, love or loathing. As “Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy,

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witch, and sprite,” she mediates between the male artist and the Unknown, simultaneously teaching him purity and instructing him in degradation. But what of her own artistic growth? Because that growth has for so long been radically qualified by the angel-and monster-imagery the literary woman sees in the looking glass of the male-authored text, some understanding of such imagery is an essential preliminary to any study of literature by women. As Joan Didion recently noted, “writing is an aggression” precisely because it is “an imposition ... an invasion of someone else’s most private space.” Like Leo Bersani’s observation that an “elasticity of being [is] induced by an immersion in literature,” her remark has special significance in this connection. A thorough study of those male constructs which have invaded the “most private space” of countless literate women would require hundreds of pages-- indeed, a number of excellent books have been devoted to the subject-- but we will attempt here a brief review of the fundamental extremes of angel and monster, in order to demonstrate the severity of the male text’s “imposition” upon women.²

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¹ leadership or dominance (none of the footnotes for this reading are from the author, and I have removed all the academic citations of the original for a cleaner presentation and to save paper)

² In other words, Gilbert and Gubar are going to examine the sort of representations of women that influenced nineteenth century thought. It will be their contention that women were traditionally stereotyped as either angels or monsters.

The ideal woman that male authors dream of generating is always an angel [...] At the same time, from Virginia Woolf's³ point of view, the "angel in the house" is the most pernicious image male authors have ever imposed upon literary women. Where and how did this ambiguous image originate, particularly the trivialized Victorian angel in the house that so disturbed Woolf? In the Middle Ages, of course, mankind's great teacher of purity was the Virgin Mary, a mother goddess who perfectly fitted the female role Ortner defines as "merciful dispenser of salvation." For the more secular nineteenth century, however, the eternal type of female purity was represented not by a madonna in heaven but by an angel in the house.

Nevertheless, there is a clear line of literary descent from divine Virgin to domestic angel, passing through (among many others) Dante, Milton, and Goethe⁴.

Like most Renaissance neo-Platonists⁵, Dante claimed to know God and His Virgin handmaid by knowing the Virgin's virgin attendant,

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Beatrice. Similarly, Milton, despite his undeniable misogyny⁶ (which we shall examine later), speaks of having been granted a vision of "my late espoused saint," who

Came vested all in white, pure as her mind.
Her face was veiled, yet to my fancied sight,
Love sweetness goodness, in her person shined
So clear, as in no face with more delight.

In death, in other words, Milton's human wife has taken on both the celestial brightness of Mary and (since she has been "washed from spot of childbed taint") the virginal purity of Beatrice. In fact, if she could be resurrected in the flesh she might now be an angel in the house, interpreting heaven's luminous mysteries to her wondering husband.

The famous vision of the "Eternal Feminine" (*Das Ewig-Weibliche*) with which Goethe's *Faust* concludes presents women from penitent prostitutes to angelic virgins in just this role of interpreters or intermediaries between the divine Father and his human sons. The German of Faust's "Chorus Mysticus" is extraordinarily difficult to translate in verse, but Hans Eichner's English paraphrase easily suggests the ways in which Goethe's image of female intercessors seems almost to be a revision of Milton's "late espoused saint": "All that is transitory is merely symbolical; here (that is to say, in the scene before you) the inaccessible is (symbolically) portrayed and the inexpressible is (symbolically)

³ a major English novelist of the early 20th century; in 1929 she wrote an important essay, "A Room of One's Own," that argued for more cultural space for female writers and their points of view; this essay is a foundational feminist text

⁴ Dante Alighieri: medieval Italian poet; John Milton: 17th century English poet; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: late 18th and early 19th century German novelist and poet; these are three of the most famous and important writers in the Western canon

⁵ a school of philosophy that took shape in the 3rd century, based on the teachings of Plato and earlier Platonists with elements of mysticism and some Judaic and Christian concepts; it posits a single source from which all existence emanates and with which an individual soul can be mystically united.

⁶ hatred of women (whether Milton's sexism actually rises to the level of misogyny is a controversial assertion on the part of the authors)

made manifest. The eternal feminine (i.e. the eternal principle symbolized by woman) draws us to higher spheres." Meditating on the exact nature of this eternal feminine, moreover, Eichner comments that for Goethe the "ideal of contemplative purity" is always feminine while "the ideal of significant action is masculine." Once again, therefore, it is just because women are defined as wholly passive, completely void of generative power (like "Cyphers") that they become numinous to male artists. For in the metaphysical emptiness their "purity" signifies they are, of course, *self-less*, with all the moral and psychological implications that word suggests.

Elaborating further on Goethe's eternal feminine, Eichner gives an example of the culmination of Goethe's "chain of representatives

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of the 'noblest femininity": Makarie, in the late novel *Wilhelm Meister's Travels*. His description of her usefully summarizes the philosophical background of the angel in the house:

She ... leads a life of almost pure contemplation ... in considerable isolation on a country estate ... a life without external events-- a life whose story cannot be told as there is no story. Her existence is not useless. On the contrary ... she shines like a beacon in a dark world, like a motionless lighthouse by which others, the travellers whose lives do have a story, can set their course. When those involved in feeling and action turn to her in their need, they are never dismissed without advice and consolation. She is an ideal, a model of selflessness and of purity of heart.

She has no stag of her own but gives "advice and consolation" to others, listens, smiles, sympathizes: such characteristics show that Makarie is not only the descendent of Western culture's cloistered virgins but also the direct ancestress of Coventry Patmore's angel in the house, the eponymous⁷ heroine of what may have been the middle nineteenth century's most popular book of poems.

Dedicated to "the memory of her by whom and for whom I became a poet," Patmore's *The Angel in the House* is a verse-sequence which hymns the praises and narrates the courtship and marriage of Honoria, one of the three daughters of a country Dean, a girl whose unselfish grace, gentleness, simplicity, and nobility reveal that she is not only a pattern Victorian lady but almost literally an angel on earth. Certainly her spirituality interprets the divine for her poet-husband, so that

No happier post than this I ask,
To live her laureate⁸ all my life.
On wings of love uplifted free,
And by her gentleness made great,
I'll teach how noble man should be
To match with such a lovely mate.

⁷ (of a person) giving their name to something

⁸ wreathed with a laurel leaf crown as a mark of honor (as the ancient Greeks)

Honorias essential virtue, in other words, is that her virtue makes her *man* “great.” In and of herself, she is neither great nor extraordinary. Indeed, Patmore adduces many details to stress the almost pathetic

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ordinariness of her life: she picks violets, loses her gloves, feeds her birds, waters her rose plot, and journeys to London on a train with her father the Dean, carrying in her lap a volume of Petrarch⁹ borrowed from her lover but entirely ignorant that the book is, as he tells us, “worth its weight in gold.” In short, like Goethes Makarie, Honorias has no story except a sort of anti-story of selfless innocence based on the notion that “Man must be pleased; but him to please / Is woman’s pleasure.”

Significantly, when the young poet-lover first visits the Deanery where his Honorias awaits him like Sleeping Beauty or Snow White, one of her sisters asks him if, since leaving Cambridge, he has “outgrown” Kant¹⁰ and Goethe. But if his paean of praise to the *Ewig-Weibliche* in rural England suggests that he has not, at any rate, outgrown the latter of these, that is because for Victorian men of letters Goethe represented not collegiate immaturity but moral maturity. After all, the climactic words of *Sartor Resartus*, that most influential masterpiece of Victorian sagacity, were “Close thy *Byron*¹¹; open thy *Goethe*,” and though Carlyle¹² was not specifically thinking of what came to be called “the woman question,” his canonization of Goethe meant, among other things, a new emphasis on the eternal feminine, the angel woman Patmore describes in his verses, Aurora Leigh perceives in her mother’s picture, and Virginia Woolf shudders to remember.

Of course, from the eighteenth century on, conduct books for ladies had proliferated, enjoining young girls to submissiveness, modesty, selflessness; reminding all women that they should be angelic. There is a long and crowded road from *The Booke of Curtesye* (1477) to the columns of “Dear Abby,” but social historians have fully explored its part in the creation of those “eternal feminine” virtues of modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability, politeness-- all of which are modes of mannerliness that contributed to Honorias angelic innocence. Ladies were assured by the writers of such conduct books that “There are Rules for all our Actions, even down to Sleeping with a good Grace,” and they were told that this good Grace was a woman’s duty to her husband because “if Woman owes her Being to the Comfort and Profit of man, ‘tis highly reasonable that she should be careful and diligent to content and please him.”

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The arts of pleasing men, in other words, are not only angelic characteristics; in more worldly terms, they are the proper acts of a lady. “What shall I do to gratify myself or to be admired?” is not the question a lady asks on arising, declared Mrs. Sarah Ellis, Victorian England’s foremost preceptress of female morals and manners, in 1844. No, because she is “the least engaged of any member of the household,” a woman of right feeling should devote herself to the good of others. And

⁹ Francesco Petrarca: medieval Italian poet famous for love lyrics

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant: influential 18th century German idealist philosopher

¹¹ George Gordon Byron (Lord Byron): 19th century English Romantic poet

¹² Thomas Carlyle: 19th century Scottish historian who was an early translator of Goethe into English

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she should do this silently, without calling attention to her exertions because “all that would tend to draw away her thoughts from others and fix them on herself, ought to be avoided as an evil to her.” Similarly, John Ruskin affirmed in 1865 that the woman’s “power is not for rule, not for battle, and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet orderings” of domesticity. Plainly, both writers meant that, enshrined within her home, a Victorian angel-woman should become her husband’s holy refuge from the blood and sweat that inevitably accompanies a “life of significant action,” as well as, in her “contemplative purity,” a living memento of the otherness of the divine.

At times, however, in the severity of her selflessness, as well as in the extremity of her alienation from ordinary fleshly life, this nineteenth-century angel-woman becomes not just a memento of otherness but actually a *memento mori*¹³ or, as Alexander Welsh has noted, an “Angel of Death.” Discussing Dickens’s heroines in particular and what he calls Victorian “angelology” in general, Welsh analyzes the ways in which a spiritualized heroine like Florence Dombey¹⁴ “assists in the translation of the dying to a future state,” not only by officiating at the sickbed but also by maternally welcoming the sufferer “from the other side of death.” But if the angel-woman in some curious way simultaneously inhabits both this world and the next, then there is a sense in which, besides ministering to the dying, she is herself already dead. Welsh muses on “the apparent reversibility of the heroine’s role, whereby the acts of dying and of saving someone from death seem confused,” and he points out that Dickens actually describes Florence Dombey as having the unearthly serenity of one who is dead. A spiritual messenger, an interpreter of mysteries to wondering and devoted men, the Ewig-Weibliche angel becomes, finally, a messenger of the mystical otherness of death.

As Ann Douglas has recently shown, the nineteenth-century cult

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of such death-angels as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s little Eva¹⁵ or Dickens’s little Nell¹⁶ resulted in a veritable “domestication of death,” producing both a conventionalized iconography¹⁷ and a stylized hagiography¹⁸ of dying women and children. Like Dickens’s dead-alive Florence Dombey, for instance, Louisa May Alcott’s dying Beth March¹⁹ is a household saint, and the deathbed at which she surrenders herself to heaven is the ultimate shrine of the angel-woman’s mysteries. At the same time, moreover, the aesthetic²⁰ cult of ladylike fragility and delicate beauty-- no doubt associated with the moral cult of the angel-woman-- obliged “genteel” women to “kill” themselves (as Lederer observed) into art objects: slim, pale, passive beings whose “charms” eerily recalled the snowy, porcelain immobility of the dead. Tight-lacing, fasting, vinegar-drinking, and similar cosmetic or dietary excesses were all parts of a physical regimen that helped women either to feign morbid weakness or actually to “decline” into real illness. Beth March’s beautiful ladylike sister Amy is thus, in her artful way, as pale

¹³ Latin: “remember that you will die”, less literally, an object serving as a warning or reminder of death, such as a skull

¹⁴ in his novel *Dombey and Sons*

¹⁵ in her *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

¹⁶ in his *Pickwick Papers*

¹⁷ the visual images and symbols used in a work of art or the study or interpretation of these

¹⁸ the writing of the lives of saints

¹⁹ in her *Little Women*

²⁰ of or concerning the appreciation of beauty or good taste

and frail as her consumptive sibling, and together these two heroines constitute complementary halves of the emblematic “beautiful woman” whose *death*, thought Edgar Allan Poe²¹, “is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world.”

Whether she becomes an *objet d’art*²² or a saint, however, it is the surrender of her self-- of her personal comfort, her personal desires, or both-- that is the beautiful angel-woman’s key act, while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven. For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead. A life that has no story, like the life of Goethe’s Makarie, is really a life of death, a death-in-life. The ideal of “contemplative purity” evokes, finally, both heaven and the grave. To return to Aurora Leigh’s catalogue, then-- her vision of “Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite” in her mother’s portrait-- there is a sense in which as a celestial “angel” Aurora’s mother is also a somewhat sinister “ghost,” because she wears the face of the spiritualized Victorian woman who, having died to her own desires, her own self, her own life, leads a posthumous existence in her own lifetime.

As Douglas reminds us too, though, the Victorian domestication of death represents not just an acquiescence in death by the selfless, but also a secret striving for power by the powerless. “The tombstone,” she notes, “is the sacred emblem in the cult of the overlooked.”

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Exorcised from public life, denied the pleasures (though not the pains) of sensual existence, the Victorian angel in the house was allowed to hold sway over at least one realm beyond her own household: the kingdom of the dead. But if, as nurse and comforter, spirit-guide and mystical messenger, a woman ruled the dying and the dead, might not even her admirers sometimes fear that, besides dying or easing death, she could *bring* death? As Welsh puts it, “the power of an angel to save implies, even while it denies, the power of death.” Speaking of angelic Agnes Wickfield (in *David Copperfield*²³), he adds a sinister but witty question: “Who, in the language of detective fiction, was the last person to see Dora Copperfield alive?”

Neither Welsh nor Dickens does more than hint at the angelwoman’s pernicious potential. But in this context a word to the wise is enough, for such a hint helps explain the fluid metamorphoses that the figure of Aurora’s mother undergoes. Her images of “Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch and sprite,” we begin to see, are inextricably linked, one to another, each to its opposite. Certainly, imprisoned in the coffinlike shape of a death angel, a woman might long demonically for escape. In addition, if as death angel the woman suggests a providentially selfless mother, delivering the male soul from one realm to another, the same woman’s maternal power implies, too, the fearful bondage of mortality into which every mother delivers her children. Finally, the fact that the angel woman manipulates her domestic/mystical sphere in order to ensure the well-being of those entrusted to her care reveals that she can manipulate ; she can scheme; she can plot-- stories as well as strategies.

The Victorian angel’s scheming, her mortal fleshliness, and her repressed (but therefore all the more frightening) capacity for explosive rage are often subtly acknowledged, even in the most glowing texts of male “angelographers.” Patmore’s Honoria, for instance, proves to be considerably more

²¹ 19th century American author and poet

²² French: “art object”

²³ by Charles Dickens

duplicitous than at first she seemed. "To the sweet folly of the dove," her poet-lover admits, "She joins the cunning of the snake." To be sure, the speaker shows that her wiliness is exercised in a "good" cause: "to rivet and exalt his love." Nevertheless,

Her mode of candour is deceit;
And what she thinks from what she'll say

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(Although I'll never call her cheat)
Lies far as Scotland from Cathay.

Clearly, the poet is here acknowledging his beloved's potential for what Austen's Captain Harville²⁴ called "inconstancy"-- that is, her stubborn autonomy and unknowable subjectivity, meaning the ineradicable selfishness that underlies even her angelic renunciation of self.

Similarly, exploring analogous tensions between flesh and spirit in yet another version of the angel-woman, Dante Gabriel Rossetti²⁵ places his "Blessed Damozel" behind "golden barriers" in heaven, but then observes that she is still humanly embodied. The bars she leans on are oddly warm; her voice, her hair, her tears are weirdly real and sensual, perhaps to emphasize the impossibility of complete spirituality for any woman. This "damozel"'s" life-in-death, at any rate, is still in some sense physical and therefore (paradoxically) emblematic of mortality. But though Rossetti wrote "The Blessed Damozel" in 1846, sixteen years before the suicide of his wife and model Elizabeth Siddal, the secret anxieties such imagery expressed came to the surface long after Lizzie's death. In 1869, to retrieve a poetry manuscript he had sentimentally buried with this beloved woman whose face "fill[ed] his dreams"-- buried as if woman and artwork were necessarily inseparable-- Rossetti had Lizzie's coffin exhumed, and literary London buzzed with rumors that her hair had "continued to grow after her death, to grow so long, so beautiful, so luxuriantly as to fill the coffin with its gold!" As if symbolizing the indomitable earthliness that no woman, however angelic, could entirely renounce, Lizzie Siddal Rossetti's hair leaps like a metaphor for monstrous female sexual energies from the literal and figurative coffins in which her artist-husband enclosed her. To Rossetti, its assertive radiance made the dead Lizzie seem both terrifyingly physical and fiercely supernatural. "Mid change the changeless night environeth, / Lies all that golden hair undimmed in death," he wrote.

* * *

If we define a woman like Rossetti's dead wife as indomitably earthly yet somehow supernatural, we are defining her as a witch or

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²⁴ in her *Persuasion*

²⁵ 19th century English poet

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monster, a magical creature of the lower world who is a kind of antithetical mirror image of an angel. As such, she still stands, in Sherry Ortner's words, "both under and over (but really simply outside of) the sphere of culture's hegemony." But now, as a representative of otherness, she incarnates the damning otherness of the flesh rather than the inspiring otherness of the spirit, expressing what-- to use Anne Finch's words-- men consider her own "presumptuous" desires rather than the angelic humility and "dullness" for which she was designed. Indeed, if we return to the literary definitions of "authority" with which we began this discussion, we will see that the monster-woman, threatening to replace her angelic sister, embodies intransigent female autonomy and thus represents both the author's power to allay "his" anxieties by calling their source bad names (witch, bitch, fiend, monster) and, simultaneously, the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained "place" and thus generates a story that "gets away" from its author.

Because, as Dorothy Dinnerstein has proposed, male anxieties about female autonomy probably go as deep as everyone's mother-dominated infancy, patriarchal texts have traditionally suggested that every angelically selfless Snow White must be hunted, if not haunted, by a wickedly assertive Stepmother: for every glowing portrait of submissive women enshrined in domesticity, there exists an equally important negative image that embodies the sacrilegious fiendishness of what William Blake²⁶ called the "Female Will." Thus, while male writers traditionally praise the simplicity of the dove, they invariably castigate the cunning of the serpent-- at least when that cunning is exercised in her own behalf. Similarly, assertiveness, aggressiveness-- all characteristics of a male life of "significant action"-- are "monstrous" in women precisely because "unfeminine" and therefore unsuited to a gentle life of "contemplative purity." Musing on "The Daughter of Eve," Patmore's poet-speaker remarks, significantly, that

The woman's gentle mood o'erstept
Withers my love, that lightly scans
The rest, and does in her accept
All her own faults, but none of man's.

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Luckily, his Honoria has no such vicious defects; her serpentine cunning, as we noted earlier, is concentrated entirely on pleasing her lover. But repeatedly, throughout most male literature, a sweet heroine inside the house (like Honoria) is opposed to a vicious bitch outside.

Behind Thackeray's angelically submissive Amelia Sedley²⁷, for instance-- an Honoria whose career is traced in gloomier detail than that of Patmore's angel-- lurks *Vanity Fair's* stubbornly autonomous Becky Sharp, an independent "charmer" whom the novelist at one point actually describes as a monstrous and snaky sorceress:

In describing this siren, singing and smiling, coaxing and cajoling, the author, with modest pride, asks his readers all around, has he once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster's hideous tail above water? No! Those who like may peep down under waves that

²⁶ 18th century English poet

²⁷ in William Makepeace Thackeray's novel *Vanity Fair*

are pretty transparent, and see it writhing and twirling, diabolically hideous and slimy, flapping amongst bones, or curling around corpses; but above the water line, I ask, has not everything been proper, agreeable, and decorous ...

As this extraordinary passage suggests, the monster may not only be concealed *behind* the angel, she may actually turn out to reside within (or in the lower half of) the angel. Thus, Thackeray implies, every angel in the house-- "proper, agreeable, and decorous," "coaxing and cajoling" hapless men-- is really, perhaps, a monster, "diabolically hideous and slimy."

"A woman in the shape of a monster," Adrienne Rich²⁸ observes in "Planetarium," "a monster in the shape of a woman / the skies are full of them." Because the skies *are* full of them, even if we focus only on those female monsters who are directly related to Thackeray's serpentine siren, we will find that such monsters have long inhabited male texts. Emblems of filthy materiality, committed only to their own private ends, these women are accidents of nature, deformities meant to repel, but in their very freakishness they possess unhealthy energies, powerful and dangerous arts. Moreover, to the extent that they incarnate male dread of women and, specifically, male scorn of female creativity, such characters have drastically affected the

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self-images of women writers, negatively reinforcing of submissiveness conveyed by their angelic sisters.

The first book of Spenser's²⁹ *The Faerie Queene* introduces a female monster who serves as a prototype of the entire line. Error is half woman, half serpent, "Most lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine" (1.1.126). She breeds in a dark den where her young suck on her poisonous dugs or creep back into her mouth at the sight of hated light, and in battle against the noble Red-crosse Knight, she spews out a flood of books and papers, frogs and toads. Symbolizing the dangerous effect of misdirected and undigested learning, her filthiness adumbrates that of two other powerful females in book 1, Duessa and Lucifera. But because these other women can create false appearances to hide their vile natures, they are even more dangerous.

Like Error, Duessa is deformed below the waist, as if to foreshadow *Lea*'s³⁰ "But to the girdle do the Gods inherit, Beneath is all the fiend's." When, like all witches, she must do penance at the time of the new moon by bathing with herbs traditionally used by such other witches as Scylla, Circe, and Medea, her "neather parts" are revealed as "misshapen, monstrous." But significantly, Duessa deceives and ensnares men by assuming the shape of Una, the beautiful and angelic heroine who represents Christianity, charity, docility. Similarly, Lucifera lives in what seems to be a lovely mansion, a cunningly constructed House of Pride whose weak foundation and ruinous rear quarters are carefully concealed. Both women use their arts of deception to entrap and destroy men, and the secret, shameful ugliness of both is closely associated with their hidden genitals—that is, with their femaleness.

²⁸ 20th century American poet

²⁹ 16th century English poet and-- along with Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, John Donne, and Ben Jonson-- one of the most highly regarded authors of the time period

³⁰ Shakespeare's *King Lear*

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Descending from Patristic³¹ misogynists like Tertullian³² and St. Augustine³³ through Renaissance and Restoration literature-- through Sidney's³⁴ *Cecropia*, Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth* and his *Goneril* and *Regan*³⁵, Milton's *Sin* (and even, as we shall see, his *Eve*)-- the female monster populates the works of the satirists of the eighteenth century, a company of male artists whose virulent visions must have been particularly alarming to feminine readers in an age when women had just begun to "attempt the pen." These authors attacked literary women on two fronts. First, and most obviously, through the construction of cartoon figures like Sheridan's³⁶ *Mrs. Malaprop* and

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Fielding's³⁷ *Mrs. Slipslop*, and Smollett's³⁸ *Tabitha Bramble*, they implied that language itself was almost literally alien to the female tongue.³⁹ In the mouths of women, vocabulary loses meaning, sentences dissolve, literary messages are distorted or destroyed. At the same time, more subtly but perhaps for that reason even more significantly, such authors devised elaborate anti-romances to show that the female "angel" was really a female "fiend," the ladylike paragon really an unladylike monster. Thus while the "Bluestocking" Anne Finch⁴⁰ would find herself directly caricatured (as she was by Pope⁴¹ and Gay⁴²) as a character afflicted with the "poetical Itch" like Phoebe Clinket in *Three Hours After Marriage*⁴³, she might well feel herself to be indirectly but even more profoundly attacked by Johnson's famous observation that a woman preacher was like a dog standing on its hind legs⁴⁴, or by the suggestion-- embedded in works by Swift⁴⁵, Pope, Gay, and others-- that *all* women were inexorably and inescapably monstrous, in the flesh as well as in the spirit. Finally, in a comment like Horace Walpole's⁴⁶ remark that Mary Wollstonecraft⁴⁷ was "a hyena in petticoats," the two kinds of misogynistic attacks definitively merged.

It is significant, then, that Jonathan Swift's disgust with the monstrous females who populate so many of his verses seems to have been caused specifically by the inexorable failure of female art.

³¹ of or relating to the early Christian theologians; again, the author's labeling of these figure's sexism as misogyny is controversial

³² Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus (160-230): Carthaginian theologian whose writing influenced early Christian theology

³³ Augustine of Hippo (354-430): North African early Christian theologian and one of the foundational figures of Western culture

³⁴ Sir Phillip Sydney, 16th century poet

³⁵ from *Macbeth* and *King Lear* respectively

³⁶ Richard Brinsley Sheridan, 18th century Irish playwright

³⁷ Henry Fielding, 18th century English novelist and playwright

³⁸ Tobias Smollett, 18th century Scottish novelist

³⁹ All of these characters have problems expressing their thoughts coherently into words.

⁴⁰ Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, an 18th century poet whose work was not taken seriously in her own lifetime

⁴¹ Alexander Pope, an important 18th century English poet

⁴² John Gay, 18th century playwright

⁴³ a 1717 play written by John Gay, Alexander Pope and John Arbuthnot

⁴⁴ The reference is to 18th century writer Samuel Johnson's observation that "a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all."

⁴⁵ Jonathan Swift, 18th century Anglo-Irish satirist

⁴⁶ 18th century English nobleman, art historian, man of letters, antiquarian, and Whig politician

⁴⁷ 18th century English writer, philosopher, and advocate of women's rights

Like disgusted Gulliver⁴⁸, who returns to England only to prefer the stable to the parlor, his horses to his wife, Swift projects his horror of time, his dread of physicality, on to another stinking creature-- the degenerate woman. Probably the most famous instance of this projection occurs in his so-called dirty poems. In these works, we peer behind the facade of the angel woman to discover that, say, the idealized "Caelia, Caelia, Caelia, shits!" We discover that the seemingly unblemished Chloe must "either void or burst," and that the female "inner space" of the "Queen of Love" is like a foul chamber pot. Though some critics have suggested that the misogyny implied by Swift's characterizations of these women is merely ironic, what emerges from his most furious poems in this vein is a horror of female flesh and a revulsion at the inability-- the powerlessness-- of female arts to redeem or to transform the flesh. Thus for Swift female sexuality is consistently equated with degeneration, disease, and death, while female arts are trivial attempts to forestall an inevitable end.

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Significantly, as if defining the tradition of duplicity in which even Patmore's uxorious speaker placed his heroine, Swift devotes many poems to an examination of the role deception plays in the creation of a saving but inadequate fiction of femininity. In "A Beautiful Young Nymph," a battered prostitute removes her wig, her crystal eye, her teeth, and her padding at bedtime, so that the next morning she must employ all her "Arts" to reconstruct her "scatter'd Parts." Such as they are, however, her arts only contribute to her own suffering or that of others, and the same thing is true of Diana in "The Progress of Beauty," who awakes as a mingled mass of dirt and sweat, with cracked lips, foul teeth, and gummy eyes, to spend four hours artfully reconstructing herself. Because she is inexorably rotting away, however, Swift declares that eventually all forms will fall, for "Art no longer can prevayl / When the Materialls all are gone." The strategies of Chloe, Caelia, Corinna, and Diana-- artists manqué⁴⁹ all-- have no success, Swift shows, except in temporarily staving off dissolution, for like Pope's "Sex of Queens," Swift's females are composed of what Pope called "Matter too soft," and their arts are thus always inadequate.

No wonder, then, that the Augustan⁵⁰ satirist attacks the female scribbler so virulently, reinforcing Anne Finch's doleful sense that for a woman to attempt the pen is monstrous and "presumptuous," for she is "to be dull / Expected and ddesigned." At least in part reflecting male artists' anxieties about the adequacy of their own arts, female writers are maligned as failures in eighteenth-century satire precisely because they cannot transcend their female bodily limitations: they cannot *conceive* of themselves in any but reproductive terms. Poor Phoebe Clinket, for instance, is both a caricature of Finch herself and a prototype of the female dunce who proves that literary creativity in women is merely the result of sexual frustration. Lovingly nurturing the unworthy "issue" of her muse because it attests to the "Fertility and Readiness" of her imagination, Phoebe is as sensual and indiscriminate in her poetic strainings as Lady Townley is in her insatiable erotic longings. Like mothers of illegitimate or misshapen offspring, female writers are not producing what they ought, the

⁴⁸ in his *Gulliver's Travels*

⁴⁹ French: "failed artists"

⁵⁰ style of English literature produced during the reigns of Queen Anne, King George I, and George II in the first half of the 18th century and ending in the 1740s with the deaths of Pope and Swift

satirists declare, so that a loose lady novelist is, appropriately enough, the first prize in *The Dunciad's* urinary contest, while a chamberpot is awarded to the runner-up.

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For the most part, eighteenth-century satirists limited their depiction of the female monster to low mimetic⁵¹ equivalents like Phoebe Clinket or Swift's corroding coquettes. But there were several important avatars of the monster woman who retained the allegorical anatomy of their more fantastic precursors. In *The Battle of the Books*, for instance, Swift's "Goddess Criticism" clearly symbolizes the demise of wit and learning. Devouring numberless volumes in a den as dark as Error's, she is surrounded by relatives like Ignorance, Pride, Opinion, Noise, Impudence, and Pedantry, and she herself is as allegorically deformed as any of Spenser's females.

The Goddess herself had claws like a Cat; her Head, and Ears, and Voice, resembled those of an Ass; Her Teeth fallen out before; Her Eyes turned inward, as if she lookt only upon Herself; Her diet was the overflowing of her own Gall: Her Spleen was so large, as to stand prominent like a Dug of the first Rate, nor wanted Excrescencies in forms of Teats, at which a Crew of ugly Monsters were greedily sucking; and what is wonderful to conceive, the bulk of Spleen increased faster than the Sucking could diminish it.

Like Spenser's Error and Milton's Sin, Criticism is linked by her processes of eternal breeding, eating, spewing, feeding, and redevouring to biological cycles all three poets view as destructive to transcendent, intellectual life. More, since all the creations of each monstrous mother are her excretions, and since all her excretions are both her food and her weaponry, each mother forms with her brood a self-enclosed system, cannibalistic and solipsistic: the creativity of the world made flesh is annihilating. At the same time, Swift's spleen-producing and splenetic Goddess cannot be far removed from the Goddess of Spleen in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, and-- because she is a mother Goddess-- she also has much in common with the Goddess of Dullness who appears in Pope's *Dunciad*. The parent of "Vapours and Female Wit," the "Hysterick or Poetic fit," the Queen of Spleen rules over all women between the ages of fifteen and fifty, and thus, as a sort of patroness of the female sexual cycle, she is associated with the same anti-creation that characterizes Error, Sin, and Criticism. Similarly, the Goddess of Dullness, a nursing mother worshipped by a society of dunces, symbolizes the failure of

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culture, the failure of art, and the death of the satirist. The huge daughter of Chaos and Night, she rocks the laureate in her ample lap while handing out rewards and intoxicating drinks to her dull sons. A Queen of Ooze, whose inertia comments on idealized Queens of Love, she nods and all of Nature falls asleep, its light destroyed by the stupor that spreads throughout the land in the milk of her "kindness."

⁵¹ in this context, the idea that art resembles reality

In all these incarnations-- from *Error* to *Dullness*, from *Goneril* and *Regan* to *Chloe* and *Caelia*-- the female monster is a striking illustration of Simone de Beauvoir's⁵² thesis that woman has been made to represent all of man's ambivalent feelings about his own inability to control his own physical existence, his own birth and death. As the Other, woman comes to represent the contingency of life, life that is made to be destroyed. "It is the horror of his own carnal contingency," de Beauvoir notes, "which [man] projects upon [woman]." In addition, as Karen Horney and Dorothy Dinnerstein have shown, male dread of women, and specifically the infantile dread of maternal autonomy, has historically objectified itself in vilification of women, while male ambivalence about female "charms" underlies the traditional images of such terrible sorceress-goddesses as the Sphinx, Medusa, Circe, Kali, Delilah, and Salome, all of whom possess duplicitous arts that allow them both to seduce and to steal male generative energy.

The sexual nausea associated with all these monster women helps explain why so many real women have for so long expressed loathing of (or at least anxiety about) their own, inexorably female bodies. The "killing" of oneself into an art object-- the pruning and preening, the mirror madness, and concern with odors and aging, with hair which is invariably too curly or too lank, with bodies too thin or too thick-- all this testifies to the efforts women have expended not just trying to be angels but trying *not* to become female monsters. More significantly for our purposes, however, the female freak is and has been a powerfully coercive and monitory image for women secretly desiring to attempt the pen, an image that helped enforce the injunctions to silence implicit also in the concept of the *Ewig-Weibliche*. If becoming an author meant mistaking one's "sex and way," if it meant becoming an "unsexed" or perversely sexed female, then it meant becoming a monster or freak, a vile *Error*, a grotesque

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Lady Macbeth, a disgusting goddess of *Dullness*, or (to name a few later witches) a murderous Lamia, a sinister Geraldine. Perhaps, then, the "presumptuous" effort should not be made at all. Certainly the story of Lilith, one more monster woman-- indeed, according to Hebrew mythology, both the first woman *and* the first monster-- specifically connects poetic presumption with madness, freakishness, monstrosity.

Created not from Adam's rib but, like him, from the dust, Lilith was Adam's first wife, according to apocryphal⁵³ Jewish lore. Because she considered herself his equal, she objected to lying beneath him, so that when he tried to force her submission, she became enraged and, speaking the Ineffable Name⁵⁴, flew away to the edge of the Red Sea to reside with demons. Threatened by God's angelic emissaries, told that she must return or daily lose a hundred of her demon children to death, Lilith preferred punishment to patriarchal marriage, and she took her revenge against both God and Adam by injuring babies-- especially male babies, who were traditionally thought to be more vulnerable to her attacks. What her history suggests is that in patriarchal culture, female speech and female "presumption"-- that is, angry revolt against male domination-- are inextricably linked and inevitably daemonic. Excluded from the human community, even from the semidivine communal chronicles of

⁵² 20th century French existential philosopher and feminist theorist

⁵³ of questionable authorship or authenticity

⁵⁴ YHVH (Yahweh), i.e., the name of God

the Bible, the figure of Lilith represents the price women have been told they must pay for attempting to define themselves. And it is a terrible price: cursed both because she is a character who “got away” and because she dared to usurp the essentially literary authority implied by the act of naming, Lilith is locked into a vengeance (child-killing) which can only bring her more suffering (the killing of her own children). And even the nature of her one-woman revolution emphasizes her helplessness and her isolation, for her protest takes the form of a refusal and a departure, a flight of escape rather than an active rebellion like, say, Satan’s. As a paradigm of both the “witch” and the “fiend” of Aurora Leigh’s⁵⁵ “Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch and sprite,” Lilith reveals, then, just how difficult it is for women even to attempt the pen. And from George MacDonald, the Victorian fantasist who portrayed her in his astonishing *Lilith* as a paradigm of the self-tormenting assertive woman, to Laura Riding⁵⁶, who depicted her in “Eve’s Side of It” as an archetypal woman Creator,

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the problem Lilith represents has been associated with the problems of female authorship and female authority. Even if they had not studied her legend, literary women like Anne Finch, bemoaning the double bind in which the mutually dependent images of angel and monster had left them, must have gotten the message Lilith incarnates: a life of feminine submission, of “contemplative purity,” is a life of silence, a life that has no pen and no story, while a life of female rebellion, of “significant action,” is a life that must be silenced, a life whose monstrous pen tells a terrible story. Either way, the images on the surface of the looking glass, into which the female artist peers in search of her *self*, warn her that she is or must be a “Cypher,” framed and framed up, indited and indicted.

* * *

As the legend of Lilith shows, and as psychoanalysts from Freud and Jung onward have observed, myths and fairy tales often both state and enforce culture’s sentences with greater accuracy than more sophisticated literary texts. If Lilith’s story summarizes the genesis of the female monster in a single useful parable, the Grimm tale of “Little Snow White” dramatizes the essential but equivocal relationship between the angel-woman and the monster-woman, a relationship that is also implicit in Aurora Leigh’s bewildered speculations about her dead mother. “Little Snow White,” which Walt Disney entitled “Snow White and the Seven Dwarves,” should really be called Snow White and Her Wicked Stepmother, for the central action of the tale-- indeed, its only real action-- arises from the relationship between these two women: the one fair, young, pale, the other just as fair, but older, fiercer; the one a daughter, the other a mother; the one sweet, ignorant, passive, the other both artful and active; the one a sort of angel, the other an undeniable witch.

Significantly, the conflict between these two women is fought out largely in the transparent enclosures into which, like all the other images of women we have been discussing here, both have been locked: a magic looking glass, an enchanted and enchanting glass coffin. Here, wielding as weapons the tools patriarchy suggests that women use to kill themselves into art, the two women

⁵⁵ an eponymous epic novel/poem by 19th century English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning

⁵⁶ 20th century American poet

literally try to kill each other with art. Shadow fights shadow, image destroys

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image in the crystal prison, as if the “fiend” of Aurora’s mother’s portrait should plot to destroy the “angel” who is another one of her selves.

The story begins in midwinter, with a Queen sitting and sewing, framed by a window. As in so many fairy tales, she pricks her finger, bleeds, and is thereby assumed into the cycle of sexuality William Blake called the realm of “generation,” giving birth “soon after” to a daughter “as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the window frame.” All the motifs introduced in this prefatory first paragraph-- sewing, snow, blood, enclosure-- are associated with key themes in female lives (hence in female writing), and they are thus themes we shall be studying throughout this book. But for our purposes here the tale’s opening *is* merely prefatory. The real story begins when the Queen, having become a mother, metamorphoses also into a witch-- that is, into a wicked “step” mother: “. . . when the child was born, the Queen died,” and “After a year had passed the King took to himself another wife.”

When we first encounter this “new” wife, she is framed in a magic looking glass, just as her predecessor-- that is, her earlier self-- had been framed in a window. To be caught and trapped in a mirror rather than a window, however, is to be driven inward, obsessively studying self-images as if seeking a viable self. The first Queen seems still to have had prospects; not yet fallen into sexuality, she looked outward, if only upon the snow. The second Queen is doomed to the inward search that psychoanalysts like Bruno Bettelheim censoriously define as “narcissism,” but which (as Mary Elizabeth Coleridge’s “The Other Side of the Mirror” suggested) is necessitated by a state from which all outward prospects have been removed.

That outward prospects *have* been removed-- or lost or dissolved away-- is suggested not only by the Queen’s mirror obsession but by the absence of the King from the story as it is related in the Grimm version. The Queen’s husband and Snow White’s father (for whose attentions, according to Bettelheim, the two women are battling in a feminized Oedipal struggle⁵⁷) never actually appears in this story at all, a fact that emphasizes the almost stifling intensity with which the tale concentrates on the conflict in the mirror between mother and daughter, woman and woman, self and self. At the same time, though, there is clearly at least one way in which the King *is* present.

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His, surely, is the voice of the looking glass, the patriarchal voice of judgment that rules the Queen’s-- and every woman’s-- self-evaluation. He it is who decides, first, that his consort is “the fairest of all,” and then, as she becomes maddened, rebellious, witchlike, that she must be replaced by his angelically innocent and dutiful daughter, a girl who is therefore defined as “more beautiful still” than the Queen. To the extent, then, that the King, and only the King, constituted the first Queen’s prospects, he need no longer appear in the story because, having assimilated the meaning of her own

⁵⁷ a complex of males; according to Freud, desire to possess the mother sexually and to exclude the father; said to be a source of personality disorders if unresolved

sexuality (and having, thus, become the second Queen) the woman has internalized the King's rules: his voice resides now in her own mirror, her own mind.

But if Snow White is "really" the daughter of the second as well as of the first Queen (i.e., if the two Queens are identical), why does the Queen hate her so much? The traditional explanation-- that the mother is as threatened by her daughter's "budding sexuality" as the daughter is by the mother's "possession" of the father-- is helpful but does not seem entirely adequate, considering the depth and ferocity of the Queen's rage. It is true, of course, that in the patriarchal Kingdom of the text these women inhabit the Queen's life can be literally imperiled by her daughter's beauty, and true (as we shall see throughout this study) that, given the female vulnerability such perils imply, female bonding is extraordinarily difficult in patriarchy: women almost inevitably turn against women because the voice of the looking glass sets them against each other. But, beyond all this, it seems as if there is a sense in which the intense desperation with which the Queen enacts her rituals of self-absorption causes (or is caused by) her hatred of Snow White. Innocent, passive, and selflessly free of the mirror madness that consumes the Queen, Snow White represents the ideal of renunciation that the Queen has already renounced at the beginning of the story. Thus Snow White is destined to replace the Queen *because* the Queen hates her, rather than vice versa. The Queen's hatred of Snow White, in other words, exists before the looking glass has provided an obvious reason for hatred.

For the Queen, as we come to see more clearly in the course of the story, is a plotter, a plot-maker, a schemer, a witch, an artist, an impersonator, a woman of almost infinite creative energy, witty,

wily, and self-absorbed as all artists traditionally are. On the other hand, in her absolute chastity, her frozen innocence, her sweet nullity, Snow White represents precisely the ideal of "contemplative purity" we have already discussed, an ideal that could quite literally kill the Queen. An angel in the house of myth, Snow White is not only a child but (as female angels always are) childlike, docile, submissive, the heroine of a life that *has no story*. But the Queen, adult and demonic, plainly wants a life of "significant action," by definition an "unfeminine" life of stories and story-telling. And therefore, to the extent that Snow White, as her daughter, is a part of herself, she wants to kill the Snow White *in herself*, the angel who would keep deeds and dramas out of her own house.

The first death plot the Queen invents is a naively straightforward murder story: she commands one of her huntsmen to kill Snow White. But, as Bruno Bettelheim has shown, the huntsman is really a surrogate for the King, a parental-- or, more specifically, patriarchal-- figure "who dominates, controls, and subdues wild ferocious beasts" and who thus "represents the subjugation of the animal, asocial, violent tendencies in man." In a sense, then, the Queen has foolishly asked her patriarchal master to act for her in doing the subversive deed she wants to do in part to retain power over him and in part to steal his power from him. Obviously, he will not do this. As patriarchy's angelic daughter, Snow White is, after all, his child, and he must save her, not kill her. Hence he kills a wild boar in her stead, and brings its lung and liver to the Queen as proof that he has murdered the child. Thinking that she is devouring her ice-pure enemy, therefore, the Queen consumes, instead, the wild boar's organs; that is, symbolically speaking, she devours her own beastly rage, and becomes (of course) even more enraged.

When she learns that her first plot has failed, then, the Queen's story-telling becomes angrier as well as more inventive, more sophisticated, more subversive. Significantly, each of the three "tales" she tells-- that is, each of the three plots she invents-- depends on a poisonous or parodic use of a distinctively female device as a murder weapon, and in each case she reinforces the sardonic commentary on "femininity" that such weaponry makes by impersonating a "wise" woman, a "good" mother, or, as Ellen Moers would put it, an "educating heroine." As a "kind" old pedlar woman, she

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offers to lace Snow White "properly" for once-- then suffocates her with a very Victorian set of tight laces. As another wise old expert in female beauty, she promises to comb Snow White's hair "properly," then assaults her with a poisonous comb. Finally, as a wholesome farmer's wife, she gives Snow White a "very poisonous apple," which she has made in "a quite secret, lonely room, where no one ever came." The girl finally falls, killed, so it seems, by the female arts of cosmetology and cookery. Paradoxically, however, even though the Queen has been using such feminine wiles as the sirens' comb and Eve's apple subversively, to destroy angelic Snow White so that she (the Queen) can assert and aggrandize herself, these arts have had on her daughter an opposite effect from those she intended. Strengthening the chaste maiden in her passivity, they have made her into precisely the eternally beautiful, inanimate *objet d'art* patriarchal aesthetics want a girl to be. From the point of view of the mad, self-assertive Queen, conventional female arts *kill*. But from the point of view of the docile and selfless princess, such arts, even while they kill, confer the only measure of power available to a woman in a patriarchal culture.

Certainly when the kindly huntsman-father saved her life by abandoning her in the forest at the edge of his kingdom, Snow White discovered her own powerlessness. Though she had been allowed to live because she was a "good" girl, she had to find her own devious way of resisting the onslaughts of the maddened Queen, both inside and outside her self. In this connection, the seven dwarves probably represent her own dwarfed powers, her stunted selfhood, for, as Bettelheim points out, they can do little to help save the girl from the Queen. At the same time, however, her life with them is an important part of her education in submissive femininity, for in serving them she learns essential lessons of service, of selflessness, of domesticity. Finally, that at this point Snow White is a housekeeping angel in a tiny house conveys the story's attitude toward "woman's world and woman's work": the realm of domesticity is a miniaturized kingdom in which the best of women is not only like a dwarf but like a dwarf's servant.

Does the irony and bitterness consequent upon such a perception lead to Snow White's few small acts of disobedience? Or would Snow White ultimately have rebelled anyway, precisely because she

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is the Queen's true daughter? The story does not, of course, answer such questions, but it does seem to imply them, since its turning point comes from Snow White's significant willingness to be tempted by the Queen's "gifts," despite the dwarves' admonitions. Indeed, the only hint of self-interest that Snow White displays throughout the whole story comes in her "narcissistic" desire for the stay-laces,

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the comb, and the apple that the disguised murderess offers. As Bettelheim remarks, this “suggests how close the stepmother’s temptations are to Snow White’s inner desires.” Indeed, it suggests that, as we have already noted, the Queen and Snow White are in some sense one: while the Queen struggles to free herself from the passive Snow White in herself, Snow White must struggle to repress the assertive Queen in herself. That both women eat from the same deadly apple in the third temptation episode merely clarifies and dramatizes this point. The Queen’s lonely art has enabled her to contrive a two-faced fruit-- one white and one red “cheek”-- that represents her ambiguous relationship to this angelic girl who is both her daughter and her enemy, her self and her opposite. Her intention is that the girl will die of the apple’s poisoned red half-- red with her sexual energy, her assertive desire for deeds of blood and triumph-- while she herself will be unharmed by the passivity of the white half.

But though at first this seems to have happened, the apple’s effect is, finally, of course, quite different. After the Queen’s artfulness has killed Snow White into art, the girl becomes if anything even more dangerous to her “step” mother’s autonomy than she was before, because even more opposed to it in both mind and body. For, dead and self-less in her glass coffin, she is an object, to be displayed and desired, patriarchy’s marble “opus,” the decorative and decorous Galatea⁵⁸ with whom every ruler would like to grace his parlor. Thus, when the Prince first sees Snow White in her coffin, he begs the dwarves to give “it” to him as a gift, “for I cannot live without seeing Snow White. I will honor and prize her as my dearest possession”. An “it,” a possession, Snow White has become an idealized image of herself, a woman in a portrait like Aurora Leigh’s mother, and as such she has definitively proven herself to be patriarchy’s ideal woman, the perfect candidate for Queen. At this point, therefore, she regurgitates the poison apple (whose madness had

stuck in her throat) and rises from her coffin. The fairest in the land, she will marry the most powerful in the land; bidden to their wedding, the egotistically assertive, plotting Queen will become a former Queen, dancing herself to death in red-hot iron shoes.

What does the future hold for Snow White, however? When her Prince becomes a King and she becomes a Queen, what will her life be like? Trained to domesticity by her dwarf instructors, will she sit in the window, gazing out on the wild forest of her past, and sigh, and sew, and prick her finger, and conceive a child white as snow, red as blood, black as ebony wood? Surely, fairest of them all, Snow White has exchanged one glass coffin for another, delivered from the prison where the Queen put her only to be imprisoned in the looking glass from which the King’s voice speaks daily. There is, after all, no female model for her in this tale except the “good” (dead) mother and her living avatar the “bad” mother. And if Snow White escaped her first glass coffin by her goodness, her passivity and docility, her only escape from her second glass coffin, the imprisoning mirror, must evidently be through “badness,” through plots and stories, duplicitous schemes, wild dreams, fierce fictions, mad impersonations. The cycle of her fate seems inexorable. Renouncing “contemplative purity,” she must now embark on that life of “significant action” which, for a woman, is defined as a witch’s life because it is so monstrous, so unnatural. Grotesque as Errour, Duessa, Lucifera, she will

⁵⁸ in Greek mythology, a maiden who was first a sculpture created by Pygmalion and was brought to life by Aphrodite in answer to Pygmalion's prayers

practice false arts in her secret, lonely room. Suicidal as Lilith and Medea⁵⁹, she will become a murderess bent on the self-slaughter implicit in her murderous attempts against the life of her own child. Finally, in fiery shoes that parody the costumes of femininity as surely as the comb and stays she herself contrived, she will do a silent terrible death-dance out of the story, the looking glass, the transparent coffin of her own image. Her only deed, this death will imply, can be a deed of death, her only action the pernicious action of self-destruction.

In this connection, it seems especially significant that the Queen's dance of death is a silent one. In "The Juniper Tree," a version of "Little Snow White" in which a *boy's* mother tries to kill him (for different reasons, of course) the dead boy is transformed not into a silent art object but into a furious golden bird who sings a song of vengeance against his murderess and finally crushes her to death

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with a millstone. The male child's progress toward adulthood is a growth toward both self-assertion and self-articulation, "The Juniper Tree" implies, a development of the powers of speech. But the girl child must learn the arts of silence either as herself a silent image invented and defined by the magic looking glass of the male-authored text, or as a silent dancer of her own woes, a dancer who enacts rather than articulates.

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⁵⁹ the vengeful queen of ancient Greek playwright Euripides' *Medea*; she murders her own children as punishment to her husband when he abandons her for another woman