

from *The Second Sex* (1949)

By Simone de Beauvoir (France)

Translated from the French by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier

Myths
(Volume I, Part III, Chapter 1)

History has shown that men have always held all the concrete powers; from patriarchy's earliest times they have deemed it useful to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes were set up against her; she was thus concretely established as the Other. This condition served males' economic interests; but it also suited their ontological¹ and moral ambitions. Once the subject attempts to assert himself, the Other, who limits and denies him, is nonetheless necessary for him: he attains himself only through the reality that he is not. That is why man's life is never plenitude and rest, it is lack and movement, it is combat. Facing himself, man encounters Nature; he has a hold on it, he tries to appropriate it for himself. But it cannot satisfy him. Either it realizes itself as a purely abstract opposition-- it is an obstacle and remains foreign-- or it passively submits to man's desire and allows itself to be assimilated by him; he possesses it only in consuming it, that is, in destroying it. In both cases, he remains alone; he



Simone de Beauvoir
1908-1986

is alone when touching a stone, alone when digesting a piece of fruit. The other is present only if the other is himself present to himself: that is, true alterity² is a consciousness separated from my own and identical to it. It is the existence of other men that wrests each man from his immanence and enables him to accomplish the truth of his being, to accomplish himself as transcendence, as flight toward the object, as a project.³ But this foreign freedom, which confirms my freedom, also enters into conflict with it: this is the tragedy of the unhappy consciousness; each consciousness seeks to posit itself alone as

¹ relating to or based upon being or existence

² the state of being other or different; otherness

³ For Beauvoir, immanence ("being within") is always contrasted with transcendence ("moving beyond") as a way of speaking about seizing one's existential freedom. To live by criteria defined by others is to live in "bad faith" (immanence); whereas to define oneself by one's own standards is to choose freedom (transcendence). Jean-Paul Sartre said, "Man is condemned to be free" because there is no appeal from the choices one makes, since one is ultimately responsible for all one's actions and attitudes-- including the decision to pretend that one is not free ("bad faith").

sovereign subject. Each one tries to accomplish itself by reducing the other to slavery. But in work and fear the slave experiences himself as essential, and by a dialectical⁴ reversal the master appears the inessential one. The conflict can be overcome by the free recognition of each individual in the other, each one positing both itself and the other as object and as subject in a reciprocal movement. But friendship and generosity, which accomplish this recognition of freedoms concretely, are not easy virtues; they are undoubtedly man's highest accomplishment; this is where he is in his truth: but this truth is a struggle endlessly begun, endlessly abolished; it demands that man surpass himself at each instant. Put into other words, man attains an authentically moral attitude when he renounces being in order to assume his existence; through this conversion he also renounces all possession, because possession is a way of searching for being; but the conversion by which he attains true wisdom is never finished, it has to be made ceaselessly, it demands constant effort. So much so that, unable to accomplish himself in solitude, man is ceaselessly in jeopardy in his relations with his peers: his life is a difficult enterprise whose success is never assured.

But he does not like difficulty; he is afraid of danger. He has contradictory aspirations to both life and rest, existence and being; he knows very well that "a restless spirit" is the ransom for his development, that his distance from the object is the ransom for his being present to himself; but he dreams of restfulness in restlessness and of an opaque plenitude that his consciousness would nevertheless still inhabit. This embodied dream is, precisely, woman; she is the perfect intermediary between nature that is foreign to man and the peer who is too identical to him.⁵ She pits neither the hostile silence of nature nor the hard demand of a reciprocal recognition against him; by a unique privilege she is a consciousness, and yet it seems possible to possess her in the flesh. Thanks to her, there is a way to escape the inexorable dialectic of the master and the slave that springs from the reciprocity of freedoms.

It has been pointed out that there were not at first free women whom the males then enslaved and that the sexual division has never founded a division into castes.⁶

⁴ concerned with or acting through opposing forces

⁵ [author's note] "Woman is not the useless repetition of man but the enchanted space where the living alliance of man and nature occurs. If she disappeared, men would be alone, foreigners without passports in a glacial world. She is earth itself carried to life's summit, the earth become sensitive and joyful; and without her, for man, earth is mute and dead," wrote Michel Carrouges in "Les pouvoirs de la femme" (Woman's Powers), *Cahiers du Sud*, no. 292 (1948).

⁶ classes or groups of people who inherit exclusive privileges and are perceived as socially distinct

1. In the first paragraph, Beauvoir develops a contrast between *being* versus *becoming* (this is my terminology, not Beauvoir's). On the one hand, opposition to that which is not oneself is necessary in order to achieve *transcendence* (the ongoing working out of one's life as a project-- achieved through a process of continuous self-definition against how others would define one). This is what Beauvoir calls *existence* (becoming), compared here to passively acquiescing to how others would define one (what Beauvoir calls *immanence*).

However, absent reciprocity of this process in a community of equals, *becoming* (in the sense that Beauvoir describes) engenders the desire for mastery and control of others. Explain this process and the relevance it has in terms of men, women, and the establishment of patriarchy as developed in the first few paragraphs.

Assimilating the woman to the slave is a mistake; among slaves there were women, but free women have always existed, that is, women invested with religious and social dignity: they accepted man's sovereignty, and he did not feel threatened by a revolt that could transform him in turn into an object. Woman thus emerged as the inessential who never returned to the essential, as the absolute Other, without reciprocity. All the creation myths express this conviction that is precious to the male, for example, the Genesis legend, which, through Christianity, has spanned Western civilization.⁷ Eve was not formed at the same time as man; she was not made either from a different substance or from the same clay that Adam was modeled from: she was drawn from the first male's flank. Even her birth was not autonomous; God did not spontaneously choose to create her for herself and to be directly worshipped in turn: he destined her for man; he gave her to Adam to save him from loneliness, her spouse is her origin and her finality; she is his complement in the inessential mode. Thus, she appears a privileged prey. She is nature raised to the transparency of consciousness; she is a naturally submissive consciousness. And therein lies the marvelous hope that man has often placed in woman: he hopes to accomplish himself as being through carnally possessing a being while making confirmed in his freedom by a docile freedom. No man would consent to being a woman, but all want there to be women. "Thank God for creating woman." "Nature is good because it gave men woman." In these and other similar phrases, man once more asserts arrogantly and naively that his presence in this world is an inevitable fact and a right, that of woman is a simple accident-- but a fortunate one. Appearing as the Other, woman appears at the same time as a plenitude of being by opposition to the nothingness of existence that man experiences in itself; the Other, posited as object in the subject's eyes, is posited as in-itself, thus as being. Woman embodies positively the lack the existent carries in his heart, and man hopes to realize himself by finding himself through her.

But she has not represented for him the only incarnation of the Other, and she has not always had the same importance throughout history. In various periods, she has been eclipsed by other idols. When the city or the state devours the citizen, he is no longer in any position to deal with his personal destiny. Dedicated to the state, the Spartan woman has a higher station than that of other Greek women.⁸ But she is not transfigured by any masculine dream. The cult of the chief, be it Napoleon, Mussolini, or Hitler, excludes any other. In military dictatorships and totalitarian regimes, woman is no longer a privileged object. It is understandable that woman is divinized in a country that is rich and where the citizens are uncertain about what meaning to give to their lives: this is what is happening in America. In contrast, socialist ideologies, which call for the assimilation of all human beings, reject the notion that any human category be object or idol, now and for the future: in the authentically democratic society that Marx heralded, there is no place for the Other. Few men, however, correspond exactly to the soldier or the militant that they have chosen to be; as long as these men remain individuals, woman retains a singular value in their eyes. I

⁷ In the Book of Genesis of the Hebrew Bible, Adam and Eve were the first humans created by God, Eve being fashioned out of a rib of Adam while he slept (2:21 - 24).

⁸ Contrary to some modern expectation, the ancient status of women in democratic Athens was much lower than the status of women in the autocratic city state of Sparta. Though not equal to males, Spartan women were not locked away in domestic spaces (as in Athens), nor was there the persistent cultural misogyny that conceived of women as little more than a necessary evil (as evidenced by myth, rhetoric, and literature-- the Athenian playwrights Sophocles and, especially, Euripides providing some evidence, however, that this view of women was not universal).

have seen letters written by German soldiers to French prostitutes in which, in spite of Nazism, the tradition of sentimentality proved to be naively alive. Communist writers like Aragon in France⁹ and Vittorini in Italy¹⁰ give a front-row place in their works to woman as lover and mother. Perhaps the myth of woman will be phased out one day: the more women assert themselves as human beings, the more the marvelous quality of Other dies in them. But today it still exists in the hearts of all men.

Any myth implies a Subject who projects its hopes and fears of a transcendent heaven. Not positing themselves as Subject, women have not created the virile myth that would reflect their projects; they have neither religion nor poetry that belongs to them alone: they still dream through men's dreams. They worship the gods made by males. And males have shaped the great virile figures for their own exaltation: Hercules,¹¹ Prometheus,¹² Parsifal;¹³ in the destiny of these heroes, woman has merely a secondary role. Undoubtedly, there are stylized images of man as he is in his relations with woman: father, seducer, husband, the jealous one, the good son, the bad son; but men are the ones who have established them, and they have not attained the dignity of myth; they are barely more than clichés, while woman is exclusively defined in her relation to man. The asymmetry of the two categories, male and female, can be seen in the unilateral constitution of sexual myths. Woman is sometimes designated as "sex"; it is she who is the flesh, its delights and its dangers. That for woman it is man who is sexed and carnal is a truth that has never been proclaimed because there is no one to proclaim it. The representation of the world as the world itself is the work of men; they describe it from a point of view that is their own and that they confound with the absolute truth.

It is always difficult to describe a myth; it does not lend itself to being grasped or defined; it haunts consciousnesses without ever being posited opposite them as a fixed object. The object fluctuates so much and is so contradictory that its unity is not at first discerned: Delilah¹⁴ and Judith,¹⁵ Aspasia¹⁶ and Lucretia,¹⁷ Pandora¹⁸ and Athena,¹⁹ woman

⁹ Louis Aragon (1897 - 1982): French poet, novelist and editor

¹⁰ Elio Vittorini (1908 - 1966): Italian writer and novelist

¹¹ Hercules is the Roman name for the Greek divine hero Heracles, who was the son of Zeus (Roman equivalent Jupiter) and the mortal Alcmene. In classical mythology, Hercules is famous for his strength and for his numerous far-ranging adventures.

¹² Prometheus is a Titan in Greek mythology, best known as the deity in Greek mythology who was the creator of mankind and its greatest benefactor, who gifted mankind with fire stolen from Mount Olympus. He was ultimately punished for this defiance of the Olympian gods.

¹³ One of King Arthur's legendary Knights of the Round Table, Percival (or Perceval) was the original hero of the Grail quest, popularized in Chretien de Troyes' medieval poem *Conte du Graal*. The assignation of this role to Galahad is a later tradition.

¹⁴ In the Hebrew bible, Delilah is the woman that the Israelite hero Samson loves. The story of Samson in Judges 13-16 portrays a man who was given great strength by God but who ultimately loses his strength when Delilah allows the Philistines to shave his hair during his slumber.

¹⁵ In the Book of Judith (included in the Catholic Bible, but not recognized as canonical by either Jews or Protestant Christians), the Israelite Judith ingratiates herself with the Assyrian general Holofernes, eventually decapitating him as he sleeps. The Assyrians, having lost their leader, disperse, and Israel is saved.

¹⁶ Aspasia (ca. 470 BCE - ca. 400 BCE) was the lover of the Athenian statesman Pericles. She was heavily criticized at the time for what was seen as her outsized influence over Pericles and her patronage of artists and thinkers (a role that was seen as much more appropriate for a man). Since she was born in Miletus, not Athens, she was not as bound by the Athenian laws that restricted the lives of women.

¹⁷ Lucretia (died 510 BCE) was a Roman matron who killed herself after being raped by Sextus Tarquinius, son of the last king of Rome-- an event that galvanized opinion against the monarchy and helped foment the revolution that led to the establishment of the Roman Republic.

is both Eve and the Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, source of life, power of darkness; she is the elementary silence of truth, she is artifice, gossip, and lies; she is the medicine woman and witch; she is man's prey; she is his downfall, she is everything he is not and wants to have, his negation and his *raison d'être*.²⁰

"To be a woman," says Kierkegaard,²¹ "is something so strange, so confused, and so complicated that no one predicate can express it, and the multiple predicates that might be used contradict each other in such a way that only a woman could put up with it."²² This comes from being considered not positively, as she is for herself, but negatively, such as she appears to man. Because if there are other *Others* than the woman, she is still always defined as Other. And her ambiguity is that of the very idea of Other: it is that of the human condition as defined in its relation with the Other. It has already been said that the Other is Evil; but as it is necessary for the Good, it reverts to the Good; through the Other, I accede to the Whole, but it separates me from the Whole; it is the door to infinity and the measure of my finitude. And this is why woman embodies no set concept; through her the passage from hope to failure, hatred to love, good to bad, bad to good takes place ceaselessly. However she is considered, it is this ambivalence that is the most striking.

* * *

Man seeks the Other in woman as Nature and as his peer. But Nature inspires ambivalent feelings in man, as has been seen. He exploits it, but it crushes him; he is born from and he dies in it; it is the source of his being and the kingdom he bends to his will; it is a material envelope in which the soul is held prisoner, and it is the supreme reality; it is contingency and Idea, finitude and totality; it is that which opposes Spirit and himself. Both ally and enemy, it appears as the dark chaos from which life springs forth, as this very life, and as the beyond it reaches for: woman embodies nature as Mother, Spouse, and Idea;

2. At the end of the first section of the chapter, Beauvoir identifies several pair of women from myth and mythologized history that function as a seeming binary, one the praiseworthy version of the other. Why, for Beauvoir, is this not proof of the *potential* for female archetypes in myth and history to inspire and instruct women in their quest to become autonomous persons-- at least when compared to the function for men of the male protagonists in what Beauvoir calls the "virile myths?" Explain.

¹⁸ According to Greek myth, Pandora was the first woman created by the gods as a punishment for humanity for Prometheus' theft of the secret of fire. Pandora was given a sealed jar-- knowing that she would be unable to resist the temptation to open it-- that contained all the evils of the world. Upon unsealing the jar, the evils escaped, and only Hope remained inside.

¹⁹ Athena was a Greek goddess of wisdom and war. In her origin, Zeus lay with Metis, the goddess of crafty thought and wisdom, but he immediately feared the consequences, since it had been prophesied that Metis would bear children more powerful than her parents. In order to prevent this, Zeus swallowed Metis, and (after a splitting headache that was only cured when Zeus begged another of the gods to split his head with an axe), Athena emerged, fully grown and armed.

²⁰ French: the most important reason or purpose for someone or something's existence (the phrase is widely used in English)

²¹ Søren Kierkegaard (1813 - 1855): important Danish philosopher, social critic, and theologian

²² [author's note] *Stages on Life's Way*.

these figures are sometimes confounded and sometimes in opposition, and each has a double face.

Man sinks his roots in Nature; he was engendered, like animals and plants; he is well aware that he exists only inasmuch as he lives. But since the coming of patriarchy, life in man's eyes has taken on a dual aspect: it is consciousness, will, transcendence, it is intellect; and it is matter, passivity, immanence, it is flesh. Aeschylus,²³ Aristotle,²⁴ and Hippocrates²⁵ proclaimed that on earth as on Mount Olympus²⁶ it is the male principle that is the true creator: form, number, and movement come from him; Demeter²⁷ makes corn multiply, but the origin of corn and its truth are in Zeus;²⁸ woman's fertility is considered merely a passive virtue. She is earth and man seed; she is water, and he is fire. Creation has often been imagined as a marriage of fire and water; hot humidity gives birth to living beings; the Sun is the spouse of the Sea; Sun and Fire are male divinities; and the Sea is one of the most universally widespread maternal symbols. Inert, water submits to the flamboyant rays that fertilize it. Likewise, the still earth, furrowed by the laborer's toil, receives the seeds in its rows. But its role is necessary: it is the soil that nourishes the seed, shelters it, and provides its substance. Man thus continued to worship fertility goddesses, even once the Great Mother was dethroned;²⁹ he owes his harvests, herds, and prosperity to Cybele.³⁰ He owes her his very life. He exalts water and fire equally. "Glory to the sea! Glory to its waves encircled by sacred fire! Glory to the wave! Glory to the fire! Glory to the strange adventure," wrote Goethe³¹ in *Faust, Part Two*. He venerated earth: "the Matron Clay," as Blake³² called it. An Indian prophet advised his disciples not to dig up the earth because "it is a sin to hurt or cut, to tear our common mother in agricultural works ... Do I take a knife to drive into my mother's breast?... Do I mutilate her flesh so as to reach her bones?... How could I dare to cut my mother's hair?" In central India the Baidya³³ also thought that it was a sin to "rip the breast of their earth mother with the plow." Inversely, Aeschylus says of Oedipus³⁴ that he "dared to sow the sacred furrow where he was formed." Sophocles³⁵ spoke of "paternal furrows" and of the "laborer, master of a

²³ Aeschylus (523 BCE - ca. 456 BCE): ancient Greek tragedian

²⁴ Aristotle (385 - 322 BCE) was an Athenian philosopher and foundational figure in Western thought

²⁵ Hippocrates (460 BCE - 370 BCE): ancient Greek physician who lived during Greece's Classical period and is traditionally regarded as the father of medicine

²⁶ in Greek myth, the home of the gods

²⁷ Greek goddess of corn, grain, and the harvest

²⁸ Greek god of thunder and the king of the gods

²⁹ [author's note] "Of Gaea ["Earth," one of the two primeval Greek deities along with Ouranos, "Sky"] sing I, Mother firm of all, the eldest one, who feedeth life on earth, whichever walk on land or swim the seas, or fly," says a Homeric hymn. Aeschylus also glorifies the earth that "gives birth to all beings, nourishes them, and then receives the fertilized germ once again."

³⁰ Anatolian mother goddess that spread to the Greek world in the 6th century BCE where she took on many characteristics of the Greek Gaea

³¹ Johann Wolfgang (von) Goethe (1749 - 1832): German writer and statesman; in German literature he enjoys a status similar to Shakespeare in English literature

³² William Blake (1757 - 1827): English poet, painter, and printmaker

³³ a high status Hindu caste community of Bengal

³⁴ in Greek myth, a king of Thebes, the son of Laius and Jocasta, and the father by Jocasta of Eteocles, Polynices, Antigone, and Ismene: as was prophesied at his birth, he unwittingly killed his father and married his mother and, in penance, blinded himself and went into exile

³⁵ Sophocles (ca. 497 BCE - 406 BCE): ancient Greek tragedian

remote field that he visited only once during the sowing.” The beloved in an Egyptian song declares: “I am the earth!” In Islamic texts, woman is called “field ... grapevine.” In one of his hymns, Saint Francis of Assisi³⁶ speaks of “our sister, the earth, our mother, who preserves and cares for us, who produces the most varied fruits with many-colored flowers and with grass.” Michelet,³⁷ taking mud baths in Acqui, exclaims: “Dear common mother! We are one. I come from you, I return to you!” And there are even periods of vitalistic romanticism that affirm the triumph of Life over Spirit: so the earth’s and woman’s magic fertility appear to be even more marvelous than the male’s concerted works; so the man dreams of once again losing himself in maternal darkness to find the true sources of his being. The mother is the root driven into the depths of the cosmos that taps its vital juices; she is the fountain from which springs forth sweet water that is also mother’s milk, a warm spring, a mud formed of earth and water, rich in regenerating forces.³⁸

But man’s revolt against his carnal condition is more general; he considers himself a fallen god: his curse is to have fallen from a luminous and orderly heaven into the chaotic obscurity of the mother’s womb. He desires to see himself in this fire, this active and pure breath, and it is woman who imprisons him in the mud of the earth. He would like himself to be as necessary as pure Idea, as One, All, absolute Spirit; and he finds himself enclosed in a limited body, in a place and time he did not choose, to which he was not called, useless, awkward, absurd. His very being is carnal contingency to which he is subjected in his isolation, in his unjustifiable gratuitousness. It also dooms him to death. This quivering gelatin that forms in the womb (the womb, secret and sealed like a tomb) is too reminiscent of the soft viscosity of carrion for him not to turn away from it with a shudder. Wherever life is in the process of being made-- germination and fermentation-- it provokes disgust because it is being made only when it is being unmade; the viscous glandular embryo opens the cycle that ends in the rotting of death. Horrified by death’s gratuitousness, man is horrified at having been engendered; he would like to rescind his animal attachments; because of his birth, murderous Nature has a grip on him. For the primitives, childbirth is surrounded by strict taboos; in particular, the placenta must be carefully burned or thrown into the sea, because whoever might get hold of it would hold the newborn’s fate in his hands; this envelope in which the fetus is formed is the sign of its dependence; in annihilating it, the individual is able to detach himself from the living magma and to realize himself as an autonomous being. The stain of childbirth falls back on the mother. Leviticus³⁹ and all the ancient codes impose purification rites on the new mother; and often in the countryside the postpartum ceremony maintains that tradition. Everyone knows that young boys and girls and men feel a spontaneous embarrassment, one often camouflaged by sneering, at seeing a pregnant woman’s stomach or the swollen breasts of the wet nurse. In Dupuytren’s⁴⁰ museums, the curious contemplate the wax embryos and the preserved fetuses with the morbid interest they would show in a defiled grave. Notwithstanding all the

³⁶ Francis of Assisi (born Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone) (1181/1182 - 1226): Italian Roman Catholic friar, preacher, and saint

³⁷ Jules Michelet (1798 - 1874) was an important French historian. He was the first to coin the term *Renaissance* (in opposition to the medieval that had preceded it).

³⁸ [author’s note] “To the letter the woman is Isis, fertile nature. She is the river and the bed of the river, the root and the rose, the earth and the cherry tree, the vine and the grape” (M. Carrouges, “Woman’s Powers”)

³⁹ third book of the Hebrew Bible

⁴⁰ Baron Guillaume Dupuytren (1777 - 1835): French anatomist and military surgeon

respect that society surrounds it with, the function of gestation inspires spontaneous repulsion. And while the little boy in early childhood remains sensually attached to the mother's flesh, when he grows up, when he is socialized and becomes aware of his individual existence, this flesh frightens him; he wants to ignore it and to see his mother as institution only; if he wants to think of her as pure and chaste, it is less from amorous jealousy than from the refusal to acknowledge her as a body. An adolescent boy becomes embarrassed, blushes if he meets his mother, sisters, or women in his family when he is out with his friends: their presence recalls the regions of immanence from which he wants to escape; she reveals the roots that he wants to pull himself away from. The boy's irritation when his mother kisses and caresses him has the same significance; he gives up his family, mother, and mother's breast. He would like to have emerged, like Athena, into the adult world, armed from head to toe, invulnerable.⁴¹ Being conceived and born is the curse weighing on his destiny, the blemish on his being. And it is the warning of his death. The cult of germination has always been associated with the cult of the dead. Mother Earth engulfs the bones of its children within it. Women-- the Parcae and Moirai⁴²-- weave human destiny; but they also cut the threads. In most folk representations, Death is woman, and women mourn the dead because death is their work.⁴³

Thus, Mother Earth has a face of darkness: she is chaos, where everything comes from and must return to one day; she is Nothingness. The many aspects of the world that the day uncovers commingle in the night: night of spirit locked up in the generality and opacity of matter, night of sleep and nothing. At the heart of the sea, it is night: woman is the *Mare tenebrarum*⁴⁴ dreaded by ancient navigators; it is night in the bowels of the earth. Man is threatened with being engulfed in this night, the reverse of fertility, and it horrifies him. He aspires to the sky, to light, to sunny heights, to the pure and crystal clear cold of blue; and underfoot is a moist, hot, and dark gulf ready to swallow him; many legends have the hero falling and forever lost in maternal darkness: a cave, an abyss, hell.

But once again ambivalence is at work here: while germination is always associated with death, death is also associated with fertility. Detested death is like a new birth, and so it is blessed. The dead hero like Osiris⁴⁵ is resurrected every springtime, and he is regenerated by a new birth. Man's supreme hope, says Jung,⁴⁶ "is that the dark waters of death become the waters of life, that death and its cold embrace are the mother's lap, just as the sea, while engulfing the sun, re-births in the depths."⁴⁷ The theme of the burial of the

3. At the beginning of the second section of the chapter, Beauvoir says that man's view of Nature is marked by his ambivalence toward it. How does this ambivalence manifest when conceiving of Nature as female flesh? Explain.

⁴¹ see note 19

⁴² the Roman and Greek names for the Fates

⁴³ [author's note] Demeter is the archetype of the mater dolorosa. But other goddesses-- Ishtar and Artemis-- are cruel. Kali is holding a blood-filled skull. "The heads of your newly killed sons hang from your neck like a necklace ... Your figure is beautiful like rain clouds, your feet are soiled with blood," says a Hindu poem.

⁴⁴ Latin: "dark sea"

⁴⁵ Osiris was an Egyptian agricultural god associated with the annual flooding of the Nile who was murdered by his brother Set, who cut him into pieces. Osiris' body fragments were then reassembled by his wife Isis, and Osiris was resurrected as a god of the underworld.

⁴⁶ Carl Gustav Jung (1875 - 1961): Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist who founded analytical psychology

⁴⁷ [author's note] *Metamorphoses of the Libido*.

sun god within the sea and its dazzling reemergence is common to many mythologies. And man wants to live, but he also hopes for rest, sleep, for nothingness. He does not wish for immortality for himself, and thus he can learn to love death. "Inorganic matter is the mother's breast," Nietzsche⁴⁸ wrote. "Being delivered from life means becoming real again, completing oneself. Anyone who understands that would consider returning to unfeeling dust as a holiday." Chaucer⁴⁹ puts this prayer into the mouth of an old man who cannot die:

Thus restless I my wretched way must make
And on the ground, which is my mother's gate,
I knock with my staff early, aye, and late
And cry: "O my dear mother, let me in!"

Man wants to assert his individual existence and proudly rest on his "essential difference," but he also wants to break the barriers of the self and commingle with water, earth, night, Nothingness, with the Whole. Woman who condemns man to finitude also enables him to surpass his own limits: that is where the equivocal magic surrounding her comes from.

In all civilizations and still today, she inspires horror in man: the horror of his own carnal contingency that he projects on her. The girl who has not yet gone through puberty does not pose a threat; she is not the object of any taboo and has no sacred characteristics. In many primitive societies her sex even seems innocent: erotic games between boys and girls are allowed in childhood. Woman becomes impure the day she might be able to procreate. In primitive societies the strict taboos concerning girls on the day of their first period have often been described; even in Egypt, where the woman is treated with particular respect, she remains confined during her whole menstrual period.⁵⁰ She is often put on a rooftop or relegated to a shack on the outskirts of the town; she can be neither seen nor touched: what's more, she must not even touch herself with her own hand; for peoples that practice daily flea removal, she is given a stick with which she is able to scratch herself; she must not touch food with her fingers; sometimes she is strictly forbidden to eat; in other cases, her mother and sister are permitted to feed her with an instrument; but all objects that come in contact with her during this period must be burned. After this first test, the menstrual taboos are a little less strict, but they remain harsh. In particular, in Leviticus: "And if a woman have an issue, and her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be put apart seven days: and whosoever toucheth her shall be unclean until the even. And every thing that she lieth upon in her separation shall be unclean: every thing also that she sitteth upon shall be unclean. And whosoever toucheth her bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the even." This text is perfectly symmetrical with one concerning gonorrhea-provoked impurity in man. And the purifying sacrifice is identical in the two cases. Seven days after she has been purified of her flow, two turtledoves or two young pigeons have to be brought to the sacrificer, who offers them

⁴⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 - 1900): German philosopher, cultural critic, and Latin and Greek scholar, and one of the most influential thinkers of the 19th century

⁴⁹ Geoffrey Chaucer (1343 - 1400): English poet widely considered the greatest English poet of the Middle Ages

⁵⁰ [author's note] The difference between mystical and mythical beliefs and individuals' lived convictions is apparent in the following fact: Lévi-Strauss points out that "young Winnebago Indians visit their mistresses and take advantage of the privacy of the prescribed isolation of these women during their menstrual period."

to the Eternal. Even in matriarchal societies, the virtues connected to menstruation are ambivalent. On the one hand, it brings social activities to a halt, destroys the vital force, withers flowers, causes fruit to fall; but it also has beneficial effects: menses are used in love philters, in remedies, and in particular in healing cuts and bruises. Still today, when some Indians go off to fight spectral monsters haunting their rivers, they place a fiber wad filled with menstrual blood on the bow of their boat: its emanations are harmful to their supernatural enemies. In some Greek cities, young girls pay homage to the temple of Astarte⁵¹ by wearing linens stained by their first menstrual blood. But since patriarchy, only harmful powers have been attributed to the bizarre liquor flowing from the feminine sex. [...]

The strictest taboo of all concerning woman in her impure state is the prohibition of sexual intercourse with her. Leviticus condemns man to seven days of impurity if he transgresses this rule. The Laws of Manu⁵² are even harsher: "The wisdom, energy, strength, and vitality of a man coming near a woman stained by menstrual excretions perish definitively." Priests ordered fifty days of penance for men who had sexual relations during menstruation. Since the feminine principle is then considered as reaching its highest power, it is feared that it would triumph over the male principle in intimate contact. Less specifically, man shies away from finding the mother's feared essence in the woman he possesses; he works at dissociating these two aspects of femininity: that explains why incest is prohibited by exogamy or more modern forms and is a universal law; that explains why man distances himself from woman sexually when she is particularly destined for her reproductive role: during her period, when she is pregnant, or when she is nursing. Not only does the Oedipus complex⁵³-- whose description, incidentally, has to be revised-- not contradict this attitude: on the contrary, it even implies it. Man guards himself against woman to the extent that she is the confused source of the world and disorder become organic.

However, this representation of woman also allows the society that has been separated from the cosmos and the gods to remain in communication with them. She still assures the fertility of the fields for the bedouins and the Iroquois; in ancient Greece, she heard subterranean voices; she understood the language of the wind and the trees: she was the Pythia,⁵⁴ Sibyl,⁵⁵ and prophetess. The dead and the gods spoke through her mouth. Still today, she has these powers of divination: she is medium, palmist, card reader, clairvoyant, inspired; she hears voices and has visions. When men feel the need to delve into vegetable and animal life-- like Antaeus, who touched earth to recoup his strength⁵⁶-- they call upon woman. Throughout the Greek and Roman rationalist civilizations, chthonian⁵⁷ cults subsisted. They could usually be found on the periphery of official

⁵¹ the Hellenized form of the Middle Eastern goddess Ishtar, a goddess of fertility, sexuality, and war

⁵² the Manusmṛti, a Sanskrit law code from the 2nd or 3rd century BCE

⁵³ see note 34 for the myth of Oedipus; according to Freud, the Oedipus complex is a desire in young children for sexual involvement with the parent of the opposite sex and a concomitant sense of rivalry with the parent of the same sex; it is a crucial stage in the normal developmental process

⁵⁴ the ancient Greek Oracle of Delphi whose prophecies were uttered through a female medium

⁵⁵ a woman in ancient times supposed to utter the oracles and prophecies of a god

⁵⁶ In Greek myth, Antaeus would challenge all passers-by to wrestling matches and remained invincible as long as he remained in contact with his mother, the earth. He was ultimately defeated by the Greek hero Heracles.

⁵⁷ concerning, belonging to, or inhabiting the underworld

religious life; they even ended up, as in Eleusis, taking the form of mysteries:⁵⁸ they had the opposite meaning of sun cults, where man asserted his will for separation and spirituality; but they complemented them; man sought to overcome his solitude by ecstasy: that is the goal of mysteries, orgies, and bacchanals. In the world reconquered by males, the male god Dionysus⁵⁹ usurped Ishtar's and Astarte's magic and wild virtues; but it was women who went wild over his image: the maenads, thyades, and bacchantes⁶⁰ led men to religious drunkenness and sacred madness. The role of sacred prostitution is similar: both to unleash and to channel the powers of fertility. Even today, popular holidays are exemplified by outbreaks of eroticism; woman is not just an object of pleasure but a means of reaching this hubris in which the individual surpasses himself. "What a being possesses in the deepest part of himself, what is lost and tragic, the 'blinding wonder' can no longer be found anywhere but on a bed," wrote Georges Bataille.⁶¹

In sexual release, man in his lover's embrace seeks to lose himself in the infinite mystery of the flesh. But it has already been seen that his normal sexuality, on the contrary, dissociates Mother from Wife. He finds the mysterious alchemies of life repugnant, while his own life is nourished and enchanted by the tasty fruits of the earth; he desires to appropriate them for himself; he covets Venus⁶² freshly emerging from the waters. Woman first discovers herself in patriarchy as wife since the supreme creator is male. Before being the mother of humankind, Eve is Adam's companion; she was given to man for him to possess and fertilize as he possesses and fertilizes the soil; and through her, he makes his kingdom out of all nature. Man does not merely seek in the sexual act subjective and ephemeral pleasure. He wants to conquer, take, and possess; to have a woman is to conquer her; he penetrates her as the plowshare in the furrows; he makes her his as he makes his the earth he is working: he plows, he plants, he sows: these images are as old as writing; from antiquity to today a thousand examples can be mentioned. "Woman is like the field and man like the seeds," say the Laws of Manu. In an André Masson⁶³ drawing there is a man, shovel in hand, tilling the garden of a feminine sex.⁶⁴ Woman is her husband's prey, his property.

Man's hesitation between fear and desire, between the terror of being possessed by uncontrollable forces and the will to overcome them, is grippingly reflected in the virginity myths. Dreaded or desired or even demanded by the male, virginity is the highest form of the feminine mystery; this aspect is simultaneously the most troubling and the most

4. How do cultural narratives about reproduction and the powers associated with or attributed to reproduction demonstrate the patriarchal ambivalence about femininity? Explain.

⁵⁸ Eleusis is a town near Athens, famous in the ancient world for having been the site of the Eleusinian Mysteries dedicated to the agricultural goddess Demeter. Mystery religions were religious schools of the Greco-Roman world for which participation was reserved to initiates.

⁵⁹ Greek god of wine, ritual madness, and ecstasy

⁶⁰ names for the female worshippers of Dionysus; they were inspired by Dionysus into a state of ecstatic frenzy through a combination of dancing and drunken intoxication, and in this state were capable of superhuman feats (such as tearing men into pieces like animals)

⁶¹ Georges Bataille (1897 - 1962): French intellectual and literary figure working in literature, philosophy, anthropology, economics, sociology and history of art

⁶² Roman goddess of love (counterpart to the Greek Aphrodite)

⁶³ André Masson (1896 - 1987): French painter, sculptor, illustrator, designer and writer

⁶⁴ [author's note] Rabelais called the male sex "the worker of nature." The religious and historical origin of the phallus-plowshare-woman-furrow association has already been pointed out.

fascinating. Depending on whether man feels crushed by the powers encircling him or arrogantly believes he is able to make them his, he refuses or demands that his wife be delivered to him as a virgin. In the most primitive societies, where woman's power is exalted, it is fear that dominates; woman has to be deflowered the night before the wedding. Marco Polo⁶⁵ asserted that for the Tibetans, "none of them wanted to take a virgin girl as wife." A rational explanation has sometimes been given for this refusal: man does not want a wife who has not yet aroused masculine desires. Al-Bakri, the Arab geographer, speaking of the Slavic peoples, notes that "if a man gets married and finds that his wife is a virgin, he says: 'If you were worth something, men would have loved you and one of them would have taken your virginity.'" He then chases her out and repudiates her. It is also claimed that some primitives refuse to marry a woman unless she has already given birth, thus proving her fertility. But the real reasons for the very widespread deflowering customs are mystical. Certain peoples imagine the presence of a serpent in the vagina that would bite the spouse during the breaking of the hymen; terrifying virtues are given to virginal blood, linked to menstrual blood, and capable of ruining the male's vigor. These images express the idea that the feminine principle is so powerful and threatening because it is intact.⁶⁶ Sometimes the deflowering issue is not raised; for example, Malinowski⁶⁷ describes an indigenous population in which, because sexual games are allowed from childhood on, girls are never virgins. Sometimes, the mother, older sister, or some other matron systematically deflowers the girl and throughout her childhood widens the vaginal opening. Deflowering can also be carried out by women during puberty using a stick, a bone, or a stone, and this is not considered a surgical operation. In other tribes, the girl at puberty is subjected to savage initiation rites: men drag her out of the village and deflower her with instruments or by raping her. Giving over virgins to passersby is one of the most common rites; either these strangers are not thought to be sensitive to this mana dangerous only for the tribes' males, or it does not matter what evils befall them. Even more often, the priest, medicine man, boss, or head of the tribe deflowers the fiancée the night before the wedding; on the Malabar Coast, the Brahmans⁶⁸ have to carry out this act, apparently without joy, for which they demand high wages. All holy objects are known to be dangerous for the outsider, but consecrated individuals can handle them without risk; that explains why priests and chiefs are able to tame the malefic forces against which the spouse has to protect himself. In Rome all that was left of these customs was a symbolic ceremony: the fiancée was seated on a stone Priapus⁶⁹ phallus, with the double aim of increasing her fertility and absorbing the overpowerful and therefore harmful fluids within her. The husband defends himself in yet another way: he himself deflowers the virgin but during ceremonies that render him invulnerable at this critical juncture; for example, he does it in front of the whole village with a stick or bone. In Samoa, he uses his finger covered in a white cloth and distributes bloodstained shreds to the spectators. There is also the case of the man allowed

⁶⁵ Marco Polo (1254 - 1324): an Italian merchant traveller whose travels are recorded in *Livres des merveilles du monde*, a book that introduced Europeans to Central Asia and China

⁶⁶ [author's note] The power in combat attributed to the virgin comes from this: the Valkyries and Joan of Arc, for example.

⁶⁷ Bronisław Malinowski (1884 - 1942): important 20th century anthropologist

⁶⁸ a member of the highest Hindu caste, that of the priesthood

⁶⁹ In Greek mythology, Priapus was a minor rustic fertility god, protector of livestock, fruit plants, gardens, and male genitalia. Priapus is marked by his oversized, permanent erection.

to deflower his wife normally but he has to wait three days to ejaculate in her so that the generating seed is not soiled by hymen blood. [...]

Man finds shining stars and the moody moon, sunlight, and the darkness of caves on woman; wildflowers from hedgerows and the garden's proud rose are also woman. Nymphs, dryads, mermaids, water sprites, and fairies haunt the countryside, the woods, lakes, seas, and moors. This animism is profoundly anchored in men. For the sailor, the sea is a dangerous woman, perfidious and difficult to conquer but that he cherishes by dint of taming it. Proud, rebellious, virginal, and wicked, the mountain is woman for the mountain climber who wants to take it, even at risk of life. It is often said that these comparisons manifest sexual sublimation; rather, they express an affinity between woman and the elements as primal as sexuality itself. Man expects more from possessing woman than the satisfaction of an instinct; she is the special object through which he subjugates Nature. Other objects can also play this role. Sometimes it is on young boys' bodies that man seeks the sand of beaches, the velvet of nights, the fragrance of honeysuckle. But sexual penetration is not the only way to realize this carnal appropriation of the earth. In his novel *To a God Unknown*, Steinbeck⁷⁰ shows a man who chooses a mossy rock as mediator between him and nature; in *The Cat*, Colette⁷¹ describes a young husband who settles his love on his favorite female cat because this gentle wild animal enables him to have a grasp on the sensual universe that his woman companion cannot give. The Other can be embodied in the sea and the mountain just as well as in the woman; they provide man with the same passive and unexpected resistance that allows him to accomplish himself; they are a refusal to conquer, a prey to possess. If the sea and the mountain are woman, it is because woman is also the sea and the mountain for the lover.⁷²

But not just any woman can play the role of mediator between man and the world; man is not satisfied with finding sexual organs complementary to his own in his partner. She must embody the wondrous blossoming of life while concealing its mysterious disturbances at the same time. First of all, she has to have youth and health, for man cannot be enraptured in his embrace of a living thing unless he forgets that all life is

⁷⁰ John Steinbeck (1902 - 1968): American author

⁷¹ Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette (1873 - 1954): French novelist

⁷² [author's note] The sentence by Samivel, quoted by Bachelard in *Earth and Reveries of Will*, is telling: "I had ceased, little by little, to regard the mountains crouching in a circle at my feet as foes to vanquish, as females to trample underfoot, or trophies to provide myself and others proof of my own worth." The mountain/woman ambivalence comes across in the common idea of "foes to vanquish," "trophies," and "proof of my own worth."

This reciprocity can be seen, for example, in these two poems by Senghor:

*Naked woman, dark woman
Ripe fruit with firm flesh, dark raptures of
black wine, Mouth that gives music to my mouth
Savanna of clear horizons, savanna quivering to the fervent caress
Of the East Wind ...*

And:

*Oho! Congo, lying on your bed of forests, queen of subdued Africa.
May the mountain phalluses hold high your pavilion
For you are woman by my head, by my tongue, You are woman by my belly.*

inhabited by death. And he desires still more: that his beloved be beautiful. The ideal of feminine beauty is variable; but some requirements remain constant; one of them is that since woman is destined to be possessed, her body has to provide the inert and passive qualities of an object. Virile beauty is the body's adaptation to active functions such as strength, agility, flexibility, and the manifestation of a transcendence animating a flesh that must never collapse into itself. The only symmetry to be found in the feminine ideal is in Sparta, Fascist Italy, and Nazi Germany, societies that destined woman for the state and not for the individual and that considered her exclusively as mother, with no place for eroticism. But when woman is delivered to the male as his property, he claims that her flesh be presented in its pure facticity. Her body is grasped not as the emanation of a subjectivity but as a thing weighted in its immanence; this body must not radiate to the rest of the world, it must not promise anything but itself: its desire has to be stopped. The most naive form of this requirement is the Hottentot ideal of the steatopygous Venus,⁷³ as the buttocks are the part of the body with the fewest nerve endings, where the flesh appears as a given without purpose. The taste of people from the East for fleshy women is similar; they love the absurd luxury of this fatty proliferation that is not enlivened by any project, that has no other meaning than to be there.⁷⁴ Even in civilizations of a more subtle sensibility, where notions of form and harmony come into play, breasts and buttocks were prized objects because of the gratuitousness and contingency of their development. Customs and fashions were often applied to cut the feminine body from its transcendence: the Chinese woman with bound feet could barely walk, the Hollywood star's painted nails deprived her of her hands; high heels, corsets, hoops, farthingales, and crinolines were meant less to accentuate the woman's body's curves than to increase the body's powerlessness. Weighted down by fat or on the contrary so diaphanous that any effort is forbidden to it, paralyzed by uncomfortable clothes and rites of propriety, the body thus appeared to man as his thing. Makeup and jewels were also used for this petrification of the body and face. The function of dress and ornaments is highly complex; for some primitives, it had a sacred character; but its most usual role was to complete woman's metamorphosis into an idol. An equivocal idol: man wanted her erotic, for her beauty to be part of that of flowers and fruits; but she also had to be smooth, hard, eternal like a stone. The role of dress is both to link the body more closely to and to wrest it away from nature, to give a necessarily set artifice to palpitating life. Woman was turned into plant, panther, diamond, or mother-of-pearl by mingling flowers, furs, precious stones, shells, and feathers on her body; she perfumed herself so as to smell of roses and lilies: but feathers, silk, pearls, and perfumes also worked to hide the animal rawness from its flesh and odor. She painted her mouth and her cheeks to acquire a mask's immobile solidity; her gaze was imprisoned in the thickness of kohl and mascara, it was no longer anything but her eyes' shimmering ornamentation; braided, curled, or sculpted, her hair lost its troublesome vegetal mystery. In the embellished woman, Nature was present but captive, shaped by a human will in

⁷³ Steatopygous describes an extreme accumulation of fat on and about the buttocks. Beauvoir is writing of representations in Hottentot art that describe the cultural ideal.

⁷⁴ [author's note] "Hottentot women, in whom steatopygia is neither as developed nor as consistent as in Bushman women, think this body type is aesthetically pleasing and starting in childhood massage their daughters' buttocks to develop them. Likewise, the artificial fattening of women, a real stuffing by two means, immobility and abundant ingestion of specific foods, especially milk, is found in various regions of Africa. It is still practiced by rich Arab and Jewish city dwellers in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco" (Luquet, "Vénus des cavernes," *Journal de Psychologie*, 1934).

accordance with man's desire. Woman was even more desirable when nature was shown off to full advantage and more rigorously subjugated: the sophisticated woman has always been the ideal erotic object. And the taste for a more natural beauty is often a specious form of sophistication. Rémy de Gourmont⁷⁵ wanted women's hair to be loose, free as the streams and prairie grass: but it is on Veronica Lake's⁷⁶ hair that the waves of water and wheat could be caressed, not on a mop of hair totally left to nature. The younger and healthier a woman is and the more her new and glossy body seems destined for eternal freshness, the less useful is artifice; but the carnal weakness of this prey that man takes and its ominous deterioration always have to be hidden from him. It is also because he fears contingent destiny, because he dreams her immutable and necessary, that man looks for the idea's exactitude on woman's face, body, and legs. In primitive people, this idea is the perfection of the popular type: a thick-lipped race with a flat nose forged a thick-lipped Venus with a flat nose; later, the canons of a more complex aesthetics would be applied to women. But in any case, the more the traits and proportions of a woman seemed contrived, the more she delighted the heart of man because she seemed to escape the metamorphosis of natural things. The result is this strange paradox that by desiring to grasp nature, but transfigured, in woman, man destines her to artifice. She is not only *physis*⁷⁷ but just as much anti-*physis*; and not only in the civilization of electric permanents, hair waxing, latex girdles, but also in the country of African lip-disk women, in China, and everywhere on earth. Swift denounced this mystification in his famous ode to Celia; he railed against the coquette's paraphernalia, pointing out with disgust her body's animal servitudes;⁷⁸ he was doubly wrong to become indignant; because man wants woman at the same time to be animal and plant and that she hide behind a fabricated armature; he loves her emerging from the waves and from a high-fashion house, naked and dressed, naked beneath her clothes, exactly as he finds her in the human universe. The city dweller seeks animality in woman; but for the young peasant doing his military service, the brothel embodies the magic of the city. Woman is field and pasture but also Babylonia.

5. For Beauvoir, what is the connection between Nature myths and cultural narratives about female sexuality? What do they have in common and how are they interpreted by the patriarchal culture that disseminates them? Explain.

However, here is the first lie, the first betrayal of woman: of life itself, which, even clothed in the most attractive forms, is still inhabited by the ferments of old age and death. The very use man makes of her destroys her most precious qualities; weighed down by childbirth, she loses her sexual attraction; even sterile, the passage of time is enough to alter her charms. Disabled, ugly, or old, woman repels. She is said to be withered, faded, like a plant. Man's decrepitude is obviously also frightful; but normal man does not experience other men as flesh; he has only an abstract solidarity with these autonomous and foreign bodies. It is on woman's body, this body meant for him, that man significantly feels the flesh's deterioration. It is through the male's hostile eyes that Villon's "once

⁷⁵ Rémy de Gourmont (1858 - 1915): French Symbolist poet, novelist, and influential critic

⁷⁶ Veronica Lake (1922 - 1973): American film actress

⁷⁷ Greek: nature

⁷⁸ Jonathan Swift (1667 - 1745): Anglo-Irish satirist, essayist, political pamphleteer, poet and cleric. "The Lady's Dressing Room" is a poem Swift first published in 1732. In it, Strephon sneaks into his lover Celia's dressing room while she is away only to become disillusioned at how filthy and smelly it is. Swift uses this poem to satirize both women's vain attempts to match an ideal image and men's expectation that the illusion be real.

beautiful courtesan” contemplates her body’s degradation. Old and ugly women not only are objects without assets but also provoke hatred mixed with fear. They embody the disturbing figure of Mother, while the charms of the Wife have faded away. [...]

“The flesh is sad.”⁷⁹ And yet man has not even found definitive reassurance in his lover’s arms. Soon his desire is reborn; and often it is the desire not only for woman in general but for this specific woman. She wields a singularly troubling power. Because in his own body man does not feel the sexual need except as a general one similar to hunger or thirst without a particular object, the bond that links him to this specific feminine body is forged by the Other. The link is mysterious like the foul and fertile womb of his roots, a sort of passive force: it is magic. The hackneyed vocabulary of serialized novels where the woman is described as an enchantress or a mermaid who fascinates man and bewitches him reflects the oldest and most universal of myths. Woman is devoted to magic. Magic, said Alain,⁸⁰ is the spirit lurking in things; an action is magic when it emanates from a passivity instead of being produced by an agent; men have always considered woman precisely as the immanence of the given; if she produces harvests and children, it is not because she wills it; she is not subject, transcendence, or creative power, but an object charged with fluids. In societies where man worships such mysteries, woman, because of these qualities, is associated with religion and venerated as a priestess; but when he struggles to make society triumph over nature, reason over life, will over inert fact, woman is regarded as a sorceress. The difference between the priest and the magician is well-known: the former dominates and directs the forces he has mastered in keeping with the gods and laws, for the good of the community, on behalf of all its members, while the magician operates outside society, against the gods and laws, according to his own passions. But woman is not fully integrated into the world of men; as other, she counters them; it is natural for her to use the strengths she possesses, not to spread the hold of transcendence across the community of men and into the future, but, being separate and opposed, to draw males into the solitude of separation, into the darkness of immanence. She is the mermaid whose songs dashed the sailors against the rocks; she is Circe, who turned her lovers into animals,⁸¹ the water sprite that attracted the fisherman to the depths of the pools. The man captivated by her spell loses his will, his project, his future; he is no longer a citizen but flesh, slave to his desires, he is crossed out of the community, enclosed in the instant, thrown passively from torture to pleasure; the perverse magician pits passion against duty, the present against the unity of time, she keeps the traveler far from home, she spreads forgetfulness. In attempting to appropriate the Other, man must remain himself; but with the failure of impossible possession, he tries to become this other with whom he fails to unite; so he alienates himself, he loses himself, he drinks the potion that turns him into a stranger to himself, he falls to the bottom of deadly and roiling waters. The Mother dooms her son to death in giving him life; the woman lover draws her lover into relinquishing life and giving himself up to the supreme sleep. This link between Love and Death was pathetically illuminated in the Tristan legend,⁸² but it has a more primary truth.

⁷⁹ a quote from the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé’s (1842 - 1898) “Sea Breeze”

⁸⁰ Émile-Auguste Chartier (commonly known as Alain) (1868 - 1951): French philosopher, journalist, and pacifist

⁸¹ in Greek mythology, a goddess of magic (sometimes a witch or sorceress) who lived with her nymph attendants on the mythical island of Aiaia; she features prominently in an episode in Homer’s *The Odyssey*

⁸² Tristan is the male hero of the Arthurian Tristan and Iseult story. He was a Cornish knight of the Round Table. He is the son of Blancheflor and Rivalen (in later versions Isabelle and Meliodas), and the nephew of King Mark

Born of flesh, man accomplishes himself in love as flesh, and flesh is destined to the grave. The alliance between Woman and Death is thus confirmed; the great reaper is the inverted figure of corn-growing fertility. But it is also the frightening wife whose skeleton appears under deceitful and tender flesh.⁸³

What man thus cherishes and detests first in woman, lover as well as mother, is the fixed image of her animal destiny, the life essential to her existence, but that condemns her to finitude and death. From the day of birth, man begins to die: this is the truth that the mother embodies. In procreating, he guarantees the species against himself: this is what he learns in his wife's arms; in arousal and in pleasure, even before engendering, he forgets his singular self. Should he try to differentiate them, he still finds in both one fact alone, that of his carnal condition. He wants to accomplish it: he venerates his mother; he desires his mistress. But at the same time, he rebels against them in disgust, in fear. [...]

Saint Augustine⁸⁴ points out in horror the proximity of the sexual and excretory organs: "*Inter faeces et urinam nascimur.*"⁸⁵ Christianity's repugnance for the feminine body is such that it consents to doom its God to an ignominious death but saves him the stain of birth: the Council of Ephesus in the Eastern Church and the Lateran Council in the West affirm the virgin birth of Christ. The first Church Fathers-- Origen, Tertullian, and Jerome⁸⁶-- thought that Mary had given birth in blood and filth like other women; but the opinions of Saint Ambrose⁸⁷ and Saint Augustine prevail. The Virgin's womb remained closed. Since the Middle Ages, the fact of having a body was considered an ignominy for woman. Science itself was paralyzed for a long time by this disgust. Linnaeus,⁸⁸ in his treatise on nature, dismissed the study of woman's genital organs as "abominable." Des Laurens,⁸⁹ the French doctor, dared to ask how "this divine animal full of reason and judgment that is called man can be attracted by these obscene parts of the woman, tainted by humors and placed shamefully at the lowest part of the trunk." Many other influences come into play along with Christian thought; and even this has more than one side; but in the puritan world, for example, hatred of the flesh still obtains; it is expressed in *Light in August*, by Faulkner;⁹⁰ the hero's first sexual experiences are highly traumatic. In all literature, a young man's first

6. In what way is the female body a manifestation of the Other in male imagination? How is it interpreted both in terms of the way it attracts and repulses the patriarchal culture that interprets it? Explain.

of Cornwall, sent to fetch Iseult back from Ireland to wed the king. However, he and Iseult accidentally consume a love potion while *en route* and fall helplessly in love. The pair undergo numerous trials that test their secret affair. There are many versions of the story (that differ in details), but the legend ends Tristan dying of grief, falsely thinking that Iseult has betrayed him, while Iseult dies swooning over his corpse.

⁸³ [author's note] For example, in Prévert's ballet *Le rendez-vous* and in Cocteau's *Le jeune homme et la mort* (*The Young Man and Death*), Death is represented as a beloved young girl.

⁸⁴ Augustine of Hippo (354 CE - 430 CE): early Christian theologian and philosopher whose writings greatly influenced the development of both Western Christianity and Western philosophy

⁸⁵ Latin: "We are born between shit and piss."

⁸⁶ Origen (185-254 CE); Tertullian (ca. 155 - ca. 240 CE); and Jerome (ca. 347 - 420)

⁸⁷ Aurelius Ambrosius (ca. 340-397): a bishop of Milan who became one of the most influential ecclesiastical figures of the 4th century CE

⁸⁸ Carl Linnaeus (1707 - 1778): Swedish botanist, physician, and zoologist, who laid the foundations for the modern biological naming scheme of binomial nomenclature

⁸⁹ André du Laurens (1558 - 1609)

⁹⁰ William Faulkner (1897 - 1962): American writer and Nobel Prize laureate

sexual intercourse is often upsetting to the point of inducing vomiting; and if, in truth, such a reaction is very rare, it is not by chance that it is so often described. In puritan Anglo-Saxon countries in particular, woman stirs up more or less avowed terror in most adolescents and many men. This is quite true in France. Michel Leiris⁹¹ wrote in *L'âge d'homme* (Manhood): "I have a tendency to consider the feminine organ as a dirty thing or a wound, not less attractive though for that, but dangerous in itself, as everything that is bloody, viscous, and contaminated." The idea of venereal maladies expresses these frights; woman is feared not because she gives these illnesses; it is the illnesses that seem abominable because they come from woman: I have been told about young men who thought that too frequent sexual relations caused gonorrhoea. People also readily think that sexual intercourse makes man lose his muscular strength and mental lucidity, consumes his phosphorus, and coarsens his sensitivity. The same dangers threaten in masturbation; and for moral reasons society considers it even more harmful than the normal sexual function. Legitimate marriage and the desire to have children guard against the evil spells of eroticism. I have already said that the Other is implied in all sexual acts; and its face is usually woman's. Man experiences his own flesh's passivity the most strongly in front of her. Woman is vampire, ghoul, eater, drinker; her sex organ feeds gluttonously on the male sex organ. Some psychoanalysts have tried to give these imaginings scientific foundations: the pleasure woman derives from coitus is supposed to come from the fact that she symbolically castrates the male and appropriates his sex organ. But it would seem that these theories themselves need to be psychoanalyzed and that the doctors who invented them have projected onto them ancestral terrors.⁹²

The source of these terrors is that in the Other, beyond any annexation, alterity remains. In patriarchal societies, woman kept many of the disquieting virtues she held in primitive societies. That explains why she is never left to Nature, why she is surrounded by taboos, purified by rites, and placed under the control of priests; man is taught never to approach her in her original nudity, but through ceremonies and sacraments that wrest her from the earth and flesh and metamorphose her into a human creature: thus the magic she possesses is channeled as lightning has been since the invention of lightning rods and electric power plants. It is even possible to use her in the group's interests: this is another phase of the oscillatory movement defining man's relationship to his female. He loves her because she is his, he fears her because she remains other; but it is as the feared other that he seeks to make her most deeply his: this is what will lead him to raise her to the dignity of a person and to recognize her as his peer.

7. What is the relationship between ways that patriarchal culture describes and understands women and the logic of control that keeps women in subordination to males, and what is the role of culture and cultural narratives in facilitating this process? Explain.

⁹¹ Michel Leiris (1901 - 1990): French surrealist writer and ethnographer

⁹² [author's note] We demonstrated that the myth of the praying mantis has no biological basis.