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Course:  ENG305
Instructor:  Leila S. May
The Queen’s Looking Glass: Female Creativity, Male Images of Women, and the Metaphor of Literary Paternity

And the lady of the house was seen only as she appeared in each room, according to the nature of the lord of the room. None saw the whole of her, none but herself. For the light which she was was both her mirror and her body. None could tell the whole of her, none but herself.

—Laura Riding

Alas! A woman that attempts the pen
Such an intruder on the rights of men,
Such a presumptuous Creature is esteem’d
The fault can by no vertue be redeem’d.
—Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea

As to all that nonsense Henry and Larry talked about, the necessity of “I am God” in order to create (I suppose they mean “I am God, I am not a woman”),... this “I am God,” which makes creation an act of solitude and pride, this image of God alone making sky, earth, sea, it is this image which has confused woman.

—Anais Nin

Is a pen a metaphorical penis? Gerard Manley Hopkins seems to have thought so. In a letter to his friend R. W. Dixon in 1886 he confided a crucial feature of his theory of poetry. The artist’s “most essential quality,” he declared, is “masterly execution, which is a kind of male gift, and especially marks off men from women, the begetting of one’s thought on paper, on verse, or whatever the matter is.” In addition, he noted that “on better consideration it strikes me that the mastery I speak of is not so much in the mind as a puberty in the life of that quality. The male quality is the creative gift.”
Male sexuality, in other words, is not just analogically but actually the essence of literary power. The poet’s pen is in some sense (even more than figuratively) a penis.

Eccentric and obscure though he was, Hopkins was articulating a concept central to that Victorian culture of which he was in this case a representative male citizen. But of course the patriarchal notion that the writer “fathers” his text just as God fathered the world is and has been all-pervasive in Western literary civilization, so much so that, as Edward Said has shown, the metaphor is built into the very word, author, with which writer, deity, and pater familias are identified. Said’s miniature meditation on the word authority is worth quoting in full because it summarizes so much that is relevant here:

Authority suggests to me a constellation of linked meanings: not only, as the OED tells us, “a power to enforce obedience,” or “a derived or delegated power,” or “a power to influence action,” or “a power to inspire belief,” or “a person whose opinion is accepted”; not only those, but a connection as well with author—that is, a person who originates or gives existence to something, a begetter, beginner, father, or ancestor, a person also who sets forth written statements. There is still another cluster of meanings: author is tied to the past participle auctus of the verb augere; therefore auctor, according to Eric Partridge, is literally an increaser and thus a founder. Auctoritas is production, invention, cause, in addition to meaning a right of possession. Finally, it means continuance, or a causing to continue. Taken together these meanings are all grounded in the following notions: (1) that of the power of an individual to initiate, institute, establish—in short, to begin; (2) that this power and its product are an increase over what had been there previously; (3) that the individual wielding this power controls its issue and what is derived therefrom; (4) that authority maintains the continuity of its course.

In conclusion, Said, who is discussing “The Novel as Beginning Intention,” remarks that “All four of these [last] abstractions can be used to describe both the author and the authority of any literary text, a point Hopkins’s sexual/aesthetic theory seems to have been designed to elaborate. Indeed, Said himself later observes that a convention of most literary texts is “that the unity or integrity of the text is maintained by a series of genealogical connections: author—text, beginning-middle-end, text—meaning, reader—interpretation, and so on. Underneath all these is the imagery of succession, of paternity, or hierarchy” (italics ours).

There is a sense in which the very notion of paternity is itself, as Stephen Dedalus puts it in Ulysses, a “legal fiction,” a story requiring imagination if not faith. A man cannot verify his fatherhood by either sense or reason, after all; that his child is his is in a sense a tale he tells himself to explain the infant’s existence. Obviously, the anxiety implicit in such storytelling urgently needs not only the reassurances of male superiority that patriarchal misogyny implies, but also such compensatory fictions of the Word as those embodied in the genealogical imagery Said describes. Thus it is possible to trace the history of this compensatory, sometimes frankly stated and sometimes submerged imagery that elaborates upon what Stephen Dedalus calls the “mystical estate” of paternity through the works of many literary theoreticians besides Hopkins and Said. Defining poetry as a mirror held up to nature, the mimetic aesthetic that begins with Aristotle and descends through Sidney, Shakespeare, and Johnson implies that the poet, like a lesser God, has made or engendered an alternative, mirror-universe in which he actually seems to enclose or trap shadows of reality. Similarly, Coleridge’s Romantic concept of the human “imagination or esemplastic power” is of a virile, generative force which echoes “the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM,” while Ruskin’s phallic-sounding “Penetrative Imagination” is a “possession-taking faculty” and a “piercing . . . mind’s tongue” that seizes, cuts down, and gets at the root of experience in order “to throw up what new shoots it will.” In all these aesthetics the poet, like God the Father, is a paternalistic ruler of the fictive world he has created. Shelley called him a “legislator.” Keats noted, speaking of writers, that “the antients [sic] were Emperors of vast Provinces” though “each of the moderns” is merely an “Elector of Hanover.”

In medieval philosophy, the network of connections among sexual, literary, and theological metaphors is equally complex: God the
Father both engenders the cosmos and, as Ernst Robert Curtius notes, writes the Book of Nature: both tropes describe a single act of creation. In addition, the Heavenly Author's ultimate eschatological power is made manifest when, as the Liber Scriptus of the traditional requiem mass indicates, He writes the Book of Judgment. More recently, male artists like the Earl of Rochester in the seventeenth century and Auguste Renoir in the nineteenth, have frankly defined aesthetics based on male sexual delight. "I... never Rhym'd, but for my Pintle's [penis's] sake," declares Rochester's witty Timon, and (according to the painter Bridget Riley) Renoir "is supposed to have said that he painted his paintings with his prick." Clearly, both these artists believe, with Norman O. Brown, that "the penis is the head of the body," and they might both agree, too, with John Irwin's suggestion that the relationship "of the masculine self with the feminine-masculine work is also an autoerotic act... a kind of creative onanism in which through the use of the phallic pen on the 'pure space' of the virgin page... the self is continually spent and wasted...." No doubt it is for all these reasons, moreover, that poets have traditionally used a vocabulary derived from the patriarchal "family romance" to describe their relations with each other. As Harold Bloom has pointed out, "from the sons of Homer to the sons of Ben Jonson, poetic influence has been described as a filial relationship," a relationship of "sonship." The fierce struggle at the heart of literary history, says Bloom, is a "battle between strong equals, father and son as mighty opposites, Laius and Oedipus at the crossroads." Though many of these writers use the metaphor of literary paternity in different ways and for different purposes, all seem overwhelmingly to agree that a literary text is not only speech quite literally embodied, but also power mysteriously made manifest, made flesh. In patriarchal Western culture, therefore, the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis. More, his pen's power, like his penis's power, is not just the ability to generate life but the power to create a posterity to which he lays claim, as, in Said's paraphrase of Partridge, "an increaser and thus a founder." In this respect, the pen is truly mightier than its phallic counterpart the sword, and in patriarchy more resonantly sexual. Not only does the writer respond to his muse's quasi-sexual excitation with an outpouring of the aesthetic energy Hopkins called "the fine delight that fathers thought"—a delight poured seminally from pen to page—but as the author of an enduring text the writer engages the attention of the future in exactly the same way that a king (or father) "owns" the homage of the present. No sword-wielding general could rule so long or possess so vast a kingdom.

Finally, that such a notion of "ownership" or possession is embedded in the metaphor of paternity leads to yet another implication of this complex metaphor. For if the author/father is owner of his text and of his reader's attention, he is also, of course, owner/possessor of the subjects of his text, that is to say of those figures, scenes, and events—those brain children—he has both incarnated in black and white and "bound" in cloth or leather. Thus, because he is an author, a "man of letters" is simultaneously, like his divine counterpart, a father, a master or ruler, and an owner: the spiritual type of a patriarch, as we understand that term in Western society.

Where does such an implicitly or explicitly patriarchal theory of literature leave literary women? If the pen is a metaphorical penis, with what organ can females generate texts? The question may seem frivolous, but as our epigraph from Anaïs Nin indicates, both the patriarchal etiology that defines a solitary Father God as the only creator of all things, and the male metaphors of literary creation that depend upon such an etiology, have long "confused" literary women, readers and writers alike. For what if such a proudly masculine cosmic Author is the sole legitimate model for all earthly authors? Or worse, what if the male generative power is not just the only legitimate power but the only power there is? That literary theoreticians from Aristotle to Hopkins seemed to believe this was so no doubt prevented many women from ever "attempting the pen"—to use Anne Finch's phrase—and caused enormous anxiety in generations of those women who were "presumptuous" enough to dare such an attempt. Jane Austen's Anne Elliot understates the case when she decorously observes, toward the end of Persuasion, that "men have had every advantage of us in telling their story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their
hands" (II, chap. 11). For, as Anne Finch’s complaint suggests, the pen has been defined as not just accidentally but essentially a male “tool,” and therefore not only inappropriate but actually alien to women. Lacking Austen’s demure irony, Finch’s passionate protest goes almost as far toward the center of the metaphor of literary paternity as Hopkins’s letter to Canon Dixon. Not only is “a woman that attempts the pen” an intrusive and “presumptuous Creature,” she is absolutely unredeemable: no virtue can outweigh the “fault” of her presumption because she has grotesquely crossed boundaries dictated by Nature:

They tell us, we mistake our sex and way;  
Good breeding, passion, dancing, dressing, play  
Are the accomplishments we should desire;  
To write, or read, or think, or to enquire  
Would cloud our beauty, and exhaust our time,  
And interrupt the conquests of our prime;  
Whilst the dull management, of a servile house  
Is held by some, our outmost art and use.

Because they are by definition male activities, this passage implies, writing, reading, and thinking are not only alien but also inimical to “female” characteristics. One hundred years later, in a famous letter to Charlotte Bronte, Robert Southey rephrased the same notion: “Literature is not the business of a woman’s life, and it cannot be.” It cannot be, the metaphor of literary paternity implies, because it is physiologically as well as sociologically impossible. If male sexuality is integrally associated with the assertive presence of literary power, female sexuality is associated with the absence of such power, with the idea—expressed by the nineteenth-century thinker Otto Weininger—that “woman has no share in ontological reality.” As we shall see, a further implication of the paternity/creativity metaphor is the notion (implicit both in Weininger and in Southey’s letter) that women exist only to be acted on by men, both as literary and as sensual objects. Again one of Anne Finch’s poems explores the assumptions submerged in so many literary theories. Addressing three male poets, she exclaims:

Happy you three! happy the Race of Men!  
Born to inform or to correct the Pen  
To proffits pleasures freedom and command

Since Eve’s daughters have fallen so much lower than Adam’s sons, this passage says, all females are “Cyphers”—nullities, vacancies—existing merely and punningly to increase male “Numbers” (either poems or persons) by pleasuring either men’s bodies or their minds, their penises or their pens.

In that case, however, devoid of what Richard Chase once called “the masculine elan,” and implicitly rejecting even the slavish consolations of her “femininity,” a literary woman is doubly a “Cypher,” for she is really a “eunuch,” to use the striking figure Germaine Greer applied to all women in patriarchal society. Thus Anthony Burgess recently declared that Jane Austen’s novels fail because her writing “lacks a strong male thrust,” and William Gass lamented that literary women “lack that blood congested genital drive which energizes every great style.” The assumptions that underlie their statements were articulated more than a century ago by the nineteenth-century editor-critic Rufus Griswold. Introducing an anthology entitled The Female Poets of America, Griswold outlined a theory of literary sex roles which builds upon, and clarifies, these grim implications of the metaphor of literary paternity.

It is less easy to be assured of the genuineness of literary ability in women than in men. The moral nature of women, in its finest and richest development, partakes of some of the qualities of genius; it assumes, at least, the similitude of that which in men is the characteristic or accompaniment of the highest grade of mental inspiration. We are in danger, therefore, of mistaking for the efflorescent energy of creative intelligence, that which is only the exuberance of personal “feelings unemployed.” The most exquisite susceptibility of the spirit, and the capacity to mirror in dazzling variety the effects which circumstances or surrounding minds work upon it, may be accompanied by no power to originate, nor even, in any proper sense, to reproduce. [Italics ours]
Since Griswold has actually compiled a collection of poems by women, he plainly does not believe that all women lack reproductive or generative literary power all the time. His gender-definitions imply, however, that when such creative energy appears in a woman it may be anomalous, freakish, because as a "male" characteristic it is essentially "unfeminine."

The converse of these explicit and implicit definitions of "femininity" may also be true for those who develop literary theories based upon the "mystical estate" of fatherhood: if a woman lacks generative literary power, then a man who loses or abuses such power becomes like a eunuch—or like a woman. When the imprisoned Marquis de Sade was denied "any use of pencil, ink, pen, and paper," declares Roland Barthes, he was figuratively emasculated, for "the scriptural sperm" could flow no longer, and "without exercise, without a pen, Sade [became] bloated, [became] a eunuch." Similarly, when Hopkins wanted to explain to R. W. Dixon the aesthetic consequences of a lack of male mastery, he seized upon an explanation which developed the implicit parallel between women and eunuchs, declaring that "if the life" is not "conveyed into the work and ... displayed there ... the product is one of those hens' eggs that are good to eat and look just like live ones but never hatch" (italics ours). 19

And when, late in his life, he tried to define his own sense of sterility, his thickening writer's block, he described himself (in the sonnet "The Fine Delight That Fathers Thought") both as a eunuch and as a woman, specifically a woman deserted by male power: "the widow of an insight lost," surviving in a diminished "winter world" that entirely lacks "the roll, the rise, the carol, the creation" of male generative power, whose "strong / Spur" is phallically "live and lancing like the blow pipe flame." And once again some lines from one of Anne Finch's plaintive protests against male literary hegemony seem to support Hopkins's image of the powerless and sterile woman artist. Remarking in the conclusion of her "Introduction" to her Poems that women are "to be dull / Expected and designed" she does not repudiate such expectations, but on the contrary admonishes herself, with bitter irony, to be dull:

Be caution'd then my Muse, and still retir'd;
Nor be dispit'd, aiming to be admir'd;

Conscious of wants, still with contracted wing,
To some few friends, and to thy sorrows sing;
For groves of Lawrell, thou wert never meant;
Be dark enough thy shades, and be thou there content.20

Cut off from generative energy, in a dark and wintry world, Finch seems to be defining herself here not only as a "Cypher" but as "the widow of an insight lost."

Finch's despairing (if ironic) acceptance of male expectations and designs summarizes in a single episode the coercive power not only of cultural constraints but of the literary texts which incarnate them. For it is as much from literature as from "life" that literate women learn they are "to be dull / Expected and designed." As Leo Bersani puts it, written "language doesn't merely describe identity but actually produces moral and perhaps even physical identity... . We have to allow for a kind of dissolution or at least elasticity of being induced by an immersion in literature."21 A century and a half earlier, Jane Austen had Anne Elliot's interlocutor, Captain Harville, make a related point in Persuasion. Arguing women's inconstancy over Anne's heated objections, he notes that "all histories are against you—all stories, prose, and verse. . . . I could bring you fifty quotations in a moment on my side the argument, and I do not think I ever opened a book in my life which had not something to say upon woman's inconstancy" (II, chap. 11). To this Anne responds, as we have seen, that the pen has been in male hands. In the context of Harville's speech, her remark implies that women have not only been excluded from authorship but in addition they have been subjugate to (and subjects of) male authority. With Chaucer's astute Wife of Bath, therefore, Anne might demand, "Who peynted the leoun, tel me who?" And, like the Wife's, her own answer to her own rhetorical question would emphasize our culture's historical confusion of literary authorship with patriarchal authority:

By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,
As clerkes han withinne hir oratories,
They wolde han writen of men more wikedesnesse
Than all the mark of Adam may redresse.
In other words, what Bersani, Austen, and Chaucer all imply is that, precisely because a writer "fathers" his text, his literary creations (as we pointed out earlier) are his possession, his property. Having defined them in language and thus generated them, he owns them, controls them, and encloses them on the printed page. Describing his earliest sense of vocation as a writer, Jean-Paul Sartre recalled in *Les Mots* his childhood belief that "to write was to engrave new beings upon [the infinite Tables of the Word] or... to catch living things in the trap of phrases." Naive as such a notion may seem on the face of it, it is not "wholly an illusion, for it is his [Sartre's] truth," as one commentator observes—and indeed it is every writer's "truth," a truth which has traditionally led male authors to assume patriarchal rights of ownership over the female "characters" they engrave upon "the infinite Tables of the Word."

Male authors have also, of course, generated male characters over whom they would seem to have had similar rights of ownership. But further implicit in the metaphor of literary paternity is the idea that each man, arriving at what Hopkins called the "puberty" of his creative gift, has the ability, even perhaps the obligation, to talk back to other men by generating alternative fictions of his own. Lacking the pen/penis which would enable them similarly to refute one fiction by another, women in patriarchal societies have historically been reduced to mere properties, to characters and images imprisoned in male texts because generated solely, as Anne Elliot and Anne Finch observe, by male expectations and designs.

Like the metaphor of literary paternity itself, this corollary notion that the chief creature man has generated is woman has a long and complex history. From Eve, Minerva, Sophia, and Galatea onward, after all, patriarchal mythology defines women as created by, from, and for men, the children of male brains, ribs, and ingenuity. For Blake the eternal female was at her best an Emanation of the male creative principle. For Shelley she was an epi-psyche, a soul out of the poet's soul, whose inception paralleled on a spiritual plane the solider births of Eve and Minerva. Throughout the history of Western culture, moreover, male-engendered female figures as superficially disparate as Milton's Sin, Swift's Chloe, and Yeats's Crazy Jane have incarnated men's ambivalence not only toward female sexuality but toward their own (male) physicality. At the same time, male texts, continually elaborating the metaphor of literary paternity, have continually proclaimed that, in Honoré de Balzac's ambiguous words, "woman's virtue is man's greatest invention." A characteristically condensed and oracular comment by Norman O. Brown perfectly summarizes the assumptions on which all such texts are based:

Poetry, the creative act, the act of life, the archetypal sexual act. Sexuality is poetry. The lady is our creation, or Pygmalion's statue. The lady is the poem; [Petrarch's] Laura is, really, poetry.

No doubt this complex of metaphors and etiologies simply reflects not just the fiercely patriarchal structure of Western society but also the underpinning of misogyny upon which that severe patriarchy has stood. The roots of "authority" tell us, after all, that if woman is man's property then he must have authored her, just as surely as they tell us that if he authored her she must be his property. As a creation "penned" by man, moreover, woman has been "penned up" or "penned in." As a sort of "sentence" man has spoken, she has herself been "sentenced": fated, jailed, for he has both "indicted" her and "indicted" her. As a thought he has "framed," she has been both "framed" (enclosed) in his texts, glyphs, graphics, and "framed up" (found guilty, found wanting) in his cosmologies. For as Humpty Dumpty tells Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, the "master" of words, utterances, phrases, literary properties, "can manage the whole lot of them!"

The etymology and etiology of masculine authority are, it seems, almost necessarily identical. However, for women who felt themselves to be more than, in every sense, the properties of literary texts, the problem posed by such authority was neither metaphysical nor philological, but (as the pain expressed by Anne Finch and Anne Elliot indicates) psychological. Since both patriarchy and its texts subordinate and imprison women, before women can even attempt that pen which is so rigorously kept from them they must escape just those male texts which, defining them as "Cyphers," deny them the autonomy to formulate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them and kept them from attempting the pen.

The vicious circularity of this problem helps explain the curious passivity with which Finch responded (or pretended to respond) to...
male expectations and designs, and it helps explain, too, the centuries-
long silence of so many women who must have had talents comparable
to Finch’s. A final paradox of the metaphor of literary paternity is
the fact that in the same way an author both generates and imprisons
his fictive creatures, he silences them by depriving them of autonomy
(that is, of the power of independent speech) even as he gives them
life. He silences them and, as Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”
suggests, he stills them, or—embedding them in the marble of his
art—kills them. As Albert Gelpi neatly puts it, “the artist kills
experience into art, for temporal experience can only escape death
dying into the ‘immortality’ of artistic form. The fixity of ‘life’
in art and the fluidity of ‘life’ in nature are incompatible.” The pen,
therefore, is not only mightier than the sword, it is also
like
the sword
in its power—its need, even—to kill. And this last attribute of the
pen once again seems to be associatively linked with its metaphorical
maleness. Simone de Beauvoir has commented that the human male’s
“transcendence” of nature is symbolized by his ability to hunt and
kill, just as the human female’s identification with nature, her role
as a symbol of immanence, is expressed by her central involvement
in that life-giving but involuntary birth process which perpetuates
the species. Thus, superiority—or authority—“has been accorded in
humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills.”
In D. H. Lawrence’s words, “the Lords of Life are the Masters of
Death”—and therefore, patriarchal poetics implies, they are the
masters of art.

Commentators on female subordination from Freud and Horney
to de Beauvoir, Wolfgang Lederer, and most recently, Dorothy
Dinnerstein, have of course explored other aspects of the relationship
between the sexes that also lead men to want figuratively to “kill”
women. What Horney called male “dread” of the female is a phe-
nomenon to which Lederer has devoted a long and scholarly book.
Elaborating on de Beauvoir’s assertion that as mother of life “woman’s
first lie, her first treason [seems to be] that of life itself—life which,
though clothed in the most attractive forms, is always infested by the
ferments of age and death,” Lederer remarks upon woman’s own
tendency to “kill” herself into art in order “to appeal to man”:

From the Paleolithic on, we have evidence that woman, through
careful coiffure, through adornment and makeup, tried to stress

the eternal type rather than the mortal self. Such makeup, in
Africa or Japan, may reach the, to us, somewhat estranging
degree of a lifeless mask—and yet that is precisely the purpose
of it: where nothing is lifelike, nothing speaks of death.

For yet another reason, then, it is no wonder that women have
historically hesitated to attempt the pen. Authored by a male God
and by a godlike male, killed into a “perfect” image of herself, the
woman writer’s self-contemplation may be said to have begun with
a searching glance into the mirror of the male- inscribed literary
text. There she would see at first only those eternal lineaments fixed
on her like a mask to conceal her dreadful and bloody link to nature.
But looking long enough, looking hard enough, she would see—like
the speaker of Mary Elizabeth Coleridge’s “The Other Side of the
Mirror”—an enraged prisoner: herself. The poem describing this
vision is central to the feminist poetics we are trying to construct:

I sat before my glass one day,
And conjured up a vision bare,
Unlike the aspects glad and gay,
That erst were found reflected there—
The vision of a woman, wild
With more than womanly despair.
Her hair stood back on either side
A face bereft of loveliness.
It had no envy now to hide
What once no man on earth could guess.
It formed the thorny aureole
Of hard unsanctified distress.
Her lips were open—not a sound
Came through the parted lines of red.
What’er it was, the hideous wound
In silence and in secret bled.
No sigh relieved her speechless woe,
She had no voice to speak her dread.
And in her lurid eyes there shone
The dying flame of life’s desire,
Made mad because its hope was gone,
And kindled at the leaping fire
Of jealousy, and fierce revenge,
And strength that could not change nor tire.

Shade of a shadow in the glass,
O set the crystal surface free!
Pass—as the fairer visions pass—
Nor ever more return, to be
The ghost of a distracted hour,
That heard me whisper, ‘I am she!’

What this poem suggests is that, although the woman who is the prisoner of the mirror/text's images has “no voice to speak her dread,” although “no sigh” interrupts “her speechless woe,” she has an invincible sense of her own autonomy, her own interiority; she has a sense, to paraphrase Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, of the authority of her own experience. The power of metaphor, says Mary Elizabeth Coleridge’s poem, can only extend so far. Finally, no human creature can be completely silenced by a text or by an image. Just as stories notoriously have a habit of “getting away” from their authors, human beings since Eden have had a habit of defying authority, both divine and literary.

Once more the debate in which Austen’s Anne Elliot and her Captain Harville engage is relevant here, for it is surely no accident that the question these two characters are discussing is woman’s “inconstancy”—her refusal, that is, to be fixed or “killed” by an author/owner, her stubborn insistence on her own way. That male authors berate her for this refusal even while they themselves generate female characters who (as we shall see) perversely display “monstrous” autonomy is one of the ironies of literary art. From a female perspective, however, such “inconstancy” can only be encouraging, for—implying duplicity—it suggests that women themselves have the power to create themselves as characters, even perhaps the power to reach toward the woman trapped on the other side of the mirror/text and help her to climb out.

Before the woman writer can journey through the looking glass toward literary autonomy, however, she must come to terms with the images on the surface of the glass, with, that is, those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her human face both to lessen their dread of her “inconstancy” and—by identifying her with the “eternal types” they have themselves invented—to possess her more thoroughly. Specifically, as we will try to show here, a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of “angel” and “monster” which male authors have generated for her. Before we women can write, declared Virginia Woolf, we must “kill” the “angel in the house.” In other words, women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been “killed” into art. And similarly, all women writers must kill the angel’s necessary opposite and double, the “monster” in the house, whose Medusa-face also kills female creativity. For us as feminist critics, however, the Woolfian act of “killing” both angels and monsters must here begin with an understanding of the nature and origin of these images. At this point in our construction of a feminist poetics, then, we really must dissect in order to murder. And we must particularly do this in order to understand literature by women because, as we shall show, the images of “angel” and “monster” have been so ubiquitous throughout literature by men that they have also pervaded women’s writing to such an extent that few women have definitively “killed” either figure. Rather, the female imagination has perceived itself, as it were, through a glass darkly: until quite recently the woman writer has had (if only unconsciously) to define herself as a mysterious creature who resides behind the angel or monster or angel/monster image that lives on what Mary Elizabeth Coleridge called “the crystal surface.”

For all literary artists, of course, self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative “I AM” cannot be uttered if the “I” knows not what it is. But for the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself. From Anne Finch’s Aldelia, who struggles to escape the male designs in which she feels herself enmeshed, to Sylvia Plath’s “Lady Lazarus,” who tells “Herr Doktor . . . Herr Enemy” that “I am your opus,/I am your valuable,” the woman writer acknowledges with pain, confusion, and anger that what she sees in the mirror is usually a male construct, the “pure gold baby” of male brains, a glittering and wholly artificial
child. With Christina Rossetti, moreover, she realizes that the male artist often “feeds” upon his female subject’s face “not as she is but as she fills his dreams.” They.

Finally, as “A Woman’s Poem” of 1859 simply puts it, the woman writer insists that “You [men] make the worlds wherein you move . . . . Our world (alas you make that too!)” —and in its narrow confines, “shut in four blank walls . . . we act our parts.”

Though the highly stylized women’s roles to which this last poem alludes are all ultimately variations upon the roles of angel and monster, they seem on the surface quite varied, because so many masks, reflecting such an elaborate typology, have been invented for women. A crucial passage from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh suggests both the mystifying deathliness and the mysterious variety female artists perceive in male imagery of women.

Contemplating a portrait of her mother which, significantly, was made after its subject was dead (so that it is a kind of death mask, an image of a woman metaphorically killed into art) the young Aurora broods on the work’s iconography. Noting that her mother’s chambermaid had insisted upon having her dead mistress painted in “the red stiff silk” of her court dress rather than in an “English-fashioned shroud,” she remarks that the effect of this unlikely costume was “very strange.” As the child stared at the painting, her mother’s “swan-like supernatural white life” seemed to mingle with “whatever I last read, or heard, or dreamed,” and thus in its charismatic beauty, her mother’s image became

by turns

Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite;
A dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate;
A loving Psyche who loses sight of Love;
A still Medusa with mild milky brows,
All curdled and all clothed upon with snakes
Whose slime falls fast as sweat will; or anon
Our Lady of the Passion, stabbed with swords
Where the Babe sucked; or Lamia in her first
Moonlighted pallor, ere she shrunk and blinked,
And shuddering wriggled down to the unclean;
Or my own mother, leaving her last smile

In her last kiss upon the baby-mouth
My father pushed down on the bed for that;
Or my dead mother, without smile or kiss,
Buried at Florence.

The 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 hegemony.” 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 intransient Otherness which culture confronts with worship or fear, love or loathing. As “Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy,
Toward a Feminist Poetics

The ideal woman that male authors dream of generating is always an angel, as Norman O. Brown’s comment about Laura/poetry suggested. At the same time, from Virginia Woolf’s 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 Goethe.

Like most Renaissance neo-Platonists, Dante claimed to know God and His Virgin handmaid by knowing the Virgin’s virgin attendant, Beatrice. Similarly, Milton, despite his undeniable misogyny (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) 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
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 story 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 eponymous 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 laureate 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.

Honoria's 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 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 Petrarch borrowed from her lover but entirely ignorant that the book is, as he tells us, "worth its weight in gold." In short, like Goethe's Makarie, Honoria 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."47

Significantly, when the young poet-lover first visits the Deanery where his Honoria awaits him like Sleeping Beauty or Snow White, one of her sisters asks him if, since leaving Cambridge, he has "outgrown" Kant 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; open thy Goethe,"48 and though Carlyle 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 Honoria's 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."49