

THE CONSTRUCTION OF WOMAN AS "OTHER" IN 19TH CENTURY ENGLISH POPULAR CULTURE(*)

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"There is a good principle, which has created
order, light, and man;
and a bad principle, which has created chaos,
darkness, and woman."
Attr. to Pythagoras

Woman: The Eternal "Other"

Any society's thinking and writing about women seems to be conditioned by preconceptions about their nature and function and these conceptions, moreover, are never consistent. Women are expected to be both good and bad, sacred and profane, virgin and whore. What is consistent, though, is that "throughout history... 'women' has been constructed as man's 'other', denied the right to her own subjectivity."⁽¹⁾ Luce Irigaray argues that this denial of subjectivity to women guarantees the constitution of relatively stable objects for the [male] subject, and goes on to ask: "If the woman cannot represent the ground, the earth, the inert or opaque matter to be appropriated or repressed, how can the subject be secure in its status as a subject?"⁽²⁾

Women have always been associated with nature, chaos and the destructive forces of the universe. This association which seems to be most enduring, is also used to justify the social control of women. Ruth Padel points out that Thucydides suggests "a picture of an Athenian male self-image orientated round the need to control what is **allotriion**, the word for 'foreign', 'abroad', which is also often used for 'other' as opposed to 'self'"⁽³⁾

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(1) S. de Beauvoir, as quoted in Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Routledge, 1985, pp. 95.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 136.

(3) Ruth Padel, "Women: Model for Possession by Greek Daemons", A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt, eds., *Images of Women in Antiquity*, Croom Helm, 1983, p. 5.

This "foreign other" had to be controlled by using practical, as well as ideological, means such as rape, for instance. In most Greek myths male gods have forced sexual relations with human women; this "divine rape" may be interpreted as a projection of male controlling activity on to "divine society". The association of women with nature, especially the darker side of it, did not emerge in Antiquity; it is as old as civilization itself. The female witches of ancient Mesopotamia, the so-called cradle of civilization, were seen as the antithesis of the Mesopotamian idea of the civilized, and were associated with the steppe, the mountains and the underworld, "all of which lay beyond the area where the Mesopotamians imposed their social control."⁽⁴⁾

Women's association with nature may, of course, be traced back to the "earth goddess" that reigned over "mankind" for a long time. Then she was fertile, receptive, and protective, but at the same time fearsome. She was Cybele, the goddess of fertility and mistress of brute nature. But as man started appropriating nature she became the symbol of the threat against civilization which was equated with male order, male life and sanity. "Most Greek daemons, especially those which hunt human victims in groups (like Erinyes, 'Furies') and those which persecute the mind are female. They are... sometimes described as 'daughters of Night'. Their femaleness is linked with their earth-born status, their attack on mind and their habitation in darkness."⁽⁵⁾ The fate of "Dracula's daughters" was already sealed!

The "others" of men of the privileged classes in the Roman Empire were not much different from those of the Greeks: Women, slaves, and barbarians. To the man who grew up looking at the world from a position of unchallenged dominance these "others" were unalterably different from and inferior to him. "The most obtrusive polarity of all, that between himself and women, was explained to him in terms of a hierarchy based upon nature itself. Biologically, the doctors said, males were those fetuses who had realized their full potential."⁽⁶⁾ Males had amassed a surplus of 'heat' and fervent 'vital spirit' in the early stages of their coagulation in the womb. The hot ejaculation of male seed proved this, for it was the semen when possessed with vitality which made men. Later Roman thought was much concerned with the fear of the loss of this "vital spirit", and the equation of blood with semen that is found in the 19th century vampire stories had a history far back: "To make love was to bring one's blood to the boil, as the fiery vital spirit swept through the veins, turning the blood into the

(4) Sue Rollin, "Women and Witchcraft in Ancient Assyria", in *Ibid.*, p. 37.

(5) Ruth Padel, in *ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

(6) Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*, Columbia University Press, 1988, p. 10.

whitened foam of semen." Male body's "fires" had to be carefully banked up if they were to last, and therefore frequent sexual activity was frowned upon. Furthermore, physiologically, the progressive loss of heat could even make man "womanish". The most virile man was the man who had kept most of his vital spirit - the one, that is, who lost little or no seed⁽⁷⁾. Peter Brown points out that this fantasy of the loss of vital spirit which lay at the root of many late classical attitudes to the male body was also validated and entrenched by the contemporary medical handbooks. A reality which brings to mind Foucault's argument that the centrality which the confession of sexuality has assumed in the 19th century and has now become an integral part of the Western culture does not represent a radical break with the past but is a continuation of certain practices dealing with sexuality. According to him, these practices have been part of Western culture for several centuries and sexuality has never been "repressed" as such but has been the object of a variety of discourses⁽⁸⁾. It is interesting indeed to find the more or less same themes taken up by the nineteenth century medical/scientific or literary and artistic discourses, pointing to the power of ideology and cultural continuity.

Nineteenth Century: "What's New?"

It is obvious that misogyny is by no means confined to the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, this century has its own specificity which in turn gives a specific, though not totally new, meaning to the notion of womanhood. 18th and 19th centuries witnessed the economic rise to power of the middle classes that created a new pattern of social relationships. The 19th century was the era of imperialist colonialism and evolutionary science; in this respect, it also was a time for self-identification and drawing lines between the white male "self" and all the "others": lesser races and classes, and women. Race and gender, as C. E. Russett points out, were two of the great themes of 19th century science, and popular culture.

Scientists of this age had to come to terms with Darwin's evolutionary theory and therefore sought to order their knowledge in a way that would affirm their own privileged status in the human hierarchy by contrasting it with that of those lesser races and women⁽⁹⁾. This need gave rise to what Steven Connor calls "mythography", which provide ways of theorizing and legitimating the struggle for dominion and guaranteeing the superiority of

(7) *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 18-19.

(8) M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, *An Introduction*, Pantheon Books, 1978, *passim*.

(9) Cynthia E. Russett, *Sexual Science*, Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 204.

the white conquering races, which are always perceived as male. The myths of womanhood together with those of the "dark continent of Africa" proliferated in this era and helped to "map out a problematic space in which science and literature, myth and interpretation are knit together."⁽¹⁰⁾

Darwin's book, **Descent of Man**, had a tremendous effect on the thinking of his era. "Man's place in nature, so long established as a thing apart from the rest of creation, had suffered a radical reevaluation. The human species was now seen as sharing a common animality with the beasts that walked and crept over the earth."⁽¹¹⁾ Victorian gentlemen were desperately in need of a buffer between themselves and their animal ancestors. Well... everything in the evolutionary process seemed to point out to the "fact" that the development of woman in general tended to parallel that of the "inferior" races, rather than the evolving white male. Woman was stunted in her evolutionary growth, remaining a child forever. B. Dijkstra argues that this equation of the intellectual capacities of women and children was also a continuation of the fetishized idealization of women: "Mother and child are one in that living ray, which restores their primitive and natural unity", Said Michelet⁽¹²⁾. But women were by no means seen in that halo of "living ray" all the time; on the contrary, as masculinity became increasingly identified with rationalism and culture, women were regarded as constantly tempting men away from the path of reason and morality. Hence the proliferation of the images of women as temptresses, as clinging vines dragging men down to mere physical existence, to the depths of savagery.

Representations of Women: Discourses of Power

Cultural representations, visual or literary, do not simply reflect and express a pre-formed ideology but they play an active part in its construction and transformation, mediating the world through the specific codes they use. As we have seen above, the question of female sexuality was a critical issue in the middle decades of the 19th century, and discourses on sexuality are firmly implicated in the exercise of power relations because they are produced by historical agents with varying degrees and sources of power⁽¹³⁾. As such, representations of women in 19th century culture cons-

(10) Steven Connor, "Conclusion: Myth and Meta-myth", J.B. Bullen, ed., **The Sun Is God, Painting, Literature and Mythology in the 19th Century**, Clarendon Press, 1989, pp. 219-222.

(11) C.E. Russett, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

(12) B. Dijkstra, **Idols of Perversity**, Harvard University Press, 1986, p. 167, and Michelet as cited in Dijkstra, *ibid.*

(13) Lynda Nead, **Myths of Sexuality, Representations of Women in Victorian Britain**, Basil Blackwell, 1988, p. 3.

titute a specific discourse from the viewpoint of a specific agent who retains and exercises power: the white colonialist male.

Dominant culture of the period produced a variety of images all of which implicated the inferior, primitive nature of women and the savages. The so-called sexual science provided this culture with a "firm ground". As Cynthia E. Russett demonstrates, the consensus of this effort was that women were inherently different from men in their anatomy, physiology, temperament and intellect. In the evolutionary development of the race women had lagged behind men, much as "primitive people" lagged behind Europeans. New "sciences" such as craniology and phrenology joined hands with sexology to try to prove this "fact". One's destiny was written in one's skull and that skull was invariably smaller in women⁽¹⁴⁾. And then of course, there was the jaw: Women, it was believed, shared the prognathous jaw with the "lowest races of man" which was "the most palpable mark of an inferior organisation"⁽¹⁵⁾.

In America the "inferior character of the Negro" sanctioned the institution of slavery, in Africa, colonial subjugation; and the "inferior nature of woman" legitimized her subordination. To the educated English speaking public, C.E. Russett points out, this inferiority became familiar as "the missing five ounces of female brain"⁽¹⁶⁾. Women, in accordance with the age-long tradition that linked Aristotle with Freud, were once again defined by a lack just as they were forced to exist mainly in the gaps of the dominant culture.

But what was the reason for woman's arrested development? The answer was that she needed to preserve her energies for reproduction. This was one of the assumptions that lay behind the image of over-sexualized female body, implying that she was driven by her (animal) sexuality; and as such it was only natural that she could get along better with animals than with men! Cybele's consort was a lion, the maenads of the Bacchic cult suckled young wild animals, Eve's friendship with the snake is well known while Medusa herself is partly snake, and the witches of the middle ages would turn into wild cats echoed in Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* whose real appearance is that of a black cat. But the 19th century imagination, fed by the evolutionary theory, fixed the monkey as woman's "real nature". Under her civilized yet sensual beauty there grinned an ape, Rider Haggard's male audience was warned, when the fabulous *Ayesha* turned into one!

(14) C.E. Russett, *op. cit.* p. 18.

(15) *Ibid.*, p. 32.

(16) *Ibid.*, p. 36.

Haggards's audience was in need of this warning, because women's supposed bestiality also implied an unbridled power. Everybody who read mythology knew that Circe changed Odysseus' companions into pigs, didn't they? If you loved a woman too much, if you happened to forget her true nature, you could be turned into a beast yourself! Because, Schopenhauer said, deceit was inherent to woman: "to use it on any occasion comes as naturally to her as it comes to those animals to use their weapons, and she considers it as her right."⁽¹⁷⁾

The notion of woman's closeness to nature embodies the male fear of what might happen if she escaped her proper place, the confinement set by male control. All women, if they escaped from "the armed camp of civilization", tended to become savage and child⁽¹⁸⁾. Aeschylus, father of Greek tragedy, shows the maenads tearing apart Orpheus who represents order and civilization. In the 19th century it was apparent that this civilization was too fragile a phenomenon which could be lost very easily. Women, with their disruptive power and bestial nature could be the very agents of this regression. As Nina Auerbach points out, "excluded as woman is from 'normative' maleness, she seems less an alien than man in the non-human range of the universe. Men are less her brothers than is the spectrum of creation's mutants."⁽¹⁹⁾

Lady Arabella March of Diana's Grove in Bram Stoker's **The Lair of the White Worm** is in her "true self" a giant white worm older than mankind who lives at the bottom of a deep well. This "pit" signifies her sexuality revealing Stoker's "darkest myth of womanhood" as Auerbach puts it⁽²⁰⁾. It also reflects the paranoid fear of men of the female sexuality, especially the vagina: "from the mythic associations of her estate to the vaginal potency of her true lair, Lady Arabella's metamorphic power seems darkly intrinsic to womanhood itself."⁽²¹⁾ And as Fred Harrison argues, the sexual function of the vagina is to be penetrated, it promises to enclose the male organ and, in this respect, offers a challenge; for its promise cannot be fulfilled unless potency is achieved and sustained: "In an age when men wish to subjugate women, but doubt their ability to do so, the female sex organs acquire a threatening character."⁽²²⁾ Ambivalence about woman's openness to

(17) From the second part of **Parerga and Paralipomena** as cited in Karl Stern, **The Flight from Woman**, George Allen and Unwin, 1966, p. 112.

(18) B. Dijkstra, op. cit., p. 240.

(19) Nina Auerbach, **Woman and the Demon**, Harvard University Press, 1982, p. 66.

(20) N. Auerbach, "Magi and Maidens: The Romance of the Victorian Freud", E. Abel, ed., **Writing and Sexual Difference**, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 121.

(21) **Ibid.**

(22) Fraser Harrison, **The Dark Angel**, Sheldon Press, 1977, p. 82.

intrusion which sets a challenge to masculinity is merged, in the colonialist's mind, with the challenge posed by alien mysterious lands. Thus, Africa and the female body become one in his imagination: Both should be penetrated, yet both pose the dangers of a dark "interior" which could trap him and render him impotent.

The "Horror" of Being a Male Colonizer

Being a "real man" in 19th century world of Western imperialism required him to take this challenge. The colonial expedition, and more specifically the penetration of Africa, became a testing ground for his masculinity. But who could guarantee that he would ever get back safely from the depths of that dark labyrinth? And if he did, would he be the same man? As Rebecca Stott points out, Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* plays out all of these male anxieties. It is a story of the exploration and penetration of Africa, but it also expresses white masculine fears about female sexuality: "There is anxiety about penetration itself and the violation of the body... which expresses itself in the nightmare of the violated body revenging itself by trapping the penetrators."⁽²³⁾ Stott also argues that in the book there is an anxiety about sexual disease - the fear that the penetrated foreign body will bring death to penetrators - which brings to mind the polluting capacity of the female body/sexuality and women's association with death. The female body is both the womb that gives birth and the cave, the underworld that represents death. When Joseph Conrad gets "the first sigh of the East" upon his face, it is "like a whispered promise of mysterious delight: The mysterious East faced me, perfumed like a **flower**, silent like **death**, dark like **grave**."⁽²⁴⁾ The association between the mysterious East and the mysterious woman is obvious: both are passive in their deathly silence, yet invite (lure?) the colonizer to penetration with their flowery perfume. But who can guarantee that this is not the siren's call? Nobody; especially when it is as dark as a grave!

Another book about the colonial expedition is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and although it shares some commonalities with *King Solomon's Mines*, it also has different characteristics. *Heart of Darkness* is a journey into Africa, but it is also a journey into "the center of things", to "man's heart", his subconscious, his own savagery, which leaves the protagonist Kurtz seeing nothing but "horror" when dying. Africa is the unknown

(23) Rebecca Stott, "The Dark Continent: Africa as Female Body in Haggard's Adventure Fiction", *Feminist Review*, Spring 1989, p. 81.

(24) Joseph Conrad, "Youth", p. 41.

other where masculine identity is tested: there, a man has to prove that he is a "real man" and come to terms with all the horrible implications that imperialist manhood carries with it. He has to go into that jungle blind, but there is also the fear that this African jungle will become active and swallow him up. In Conrad's novels the psychology of imperialism and colonialism, the effect of the colonial (and sexual) encounter on the white man is explored. As the heyday of imperialism was by then over, the so-called heroic tradition at an end, Conrad's novels, to some extent, reflect the ambivalence and contradictions and the loss of moral confidence of the colonizer. This is one of the things that separates him from a Rider Haggard for example, and places him within the tradition of modernism.

As Mrinalini Sinha points out, the process of colonial justification was not a simple one. It entailed a dual approach: "On the one hand it emphasized the radical difference of the native society, which made necessary the alien control pattern of domination, and on the other, it posited a universality that opened up the possibility for the recuperation or redemption of the native... The redemption of the native, however, could never be complete because of the need to justify continued foreign domination."⁽²⁵⁾ The colonial/imperialist ideology reflected in period's popular culture, however, did not usually have this complexity. Rider Haggard, who was part of this popular culture, contributed to a certain state of mind. In this sense, he was an ideological presence: "He assisted in the propagation of imperial ideas and created for Britain an image of greatness and superiority, an image of the world with the British in control."⁽²⁶⁾ Nina Auerbach in **Woman and the Demon** sees Ayesha, the beautiful white queen who ruled in the heart of Africa, as Haggard's version of national myth, that is Queen Victoria. And she suggests the possibility of "aligning Haggard's magic country with his reader's expanding national reality."⁽²⁷⁾ According to W.R. Katz, the **Ayesha** books reveal Haggard's awareness of the way in which ideas and images of spiritual superiority can be effective political tools. An image of invincibility maintains the mystery and the sanctity of the alien ruler and keeps the colonized peoples at a safe distance⁽²⁸⁾. **Ayesha** for instance, wears a veil, does not expose herself to her subjects and says that "her empire is of the imagination." White rulers cannot afford to be exposed; their image is their "self", and has to be protected. Haggard's contribution to this self-definition and protection process, was considerable.

(25) M. Sinha, "Race and Gender", M.S. Kimmel, ed., **Changing Men**, Sage publications, 1987, p. 229.

(26) Wendy R. Katz, **Rider Haggard and the Fiction of Empire**, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 4.

(27) N. Auerbach, **op. cit.**, 1982, p. 37.

(28) W.R. Katz, **op. cit.**, p. 12.

The Fear of Emasculation

As the road to progress and imperialist invasion was linked with masculine aggression, imperialism and virility were associated: a nation, after having risen with virile energy, could become effeminate and even collapse. Therefore the nation's "stock" of virile energy, the "vital fluid" of its aggressive men had to be carefully saved. Excessive sexual activity, and still worse, masturbation was condemned. Thus women who denied their husbands sexual relations except when procreation was desired could be seen as helping them to control their "baser nature" **and** contributing to the nation's imperialist power!⁽²⁹⁾

The virility of a man had always been something precarious; semen, which according to Aristotle was a compound of hot air and water and which guaranteed man's vitality might be lost or cooled, leading a man to effeminacy: [In the Roman world] no normal man might actually become a woman, but each man trembled forever on the brink of becoming 'womankind'... It was never enough to be male, a man had to strive to remain 'virile'. He had to learn to exclude from his character and from the poise and temper of his body all telltale traces of 'softness' that might betray, in him, the half-formed state of a woman."⁽³⁰⁾ The Persians, Greeks and Romans had all experienced this loss of virility with its disastrous consequences, and now the Victorians feared they might share the same destiny. An anxiety which was closely linked with British imperialism's regression and which also mingled with the fears of being invaded "penetrated".

Most of these sexual and cultural fears and fantasies may be traced in the periods' popular text, Bram Stoker's **Dracula**. There are different readings of this vampire story, but many critics agree that here vampirism is a metaphor for sexual intercourse⁽³¹⁾. In the text, semen-blood equation plays an important symbolic role. Fears about the loss of "vital fluid" merge with the fear of blood loss and woman's very nature, once again, makes her a natural candidate for a bloodthirsty vampire. Women, with their inevitable monthly blood loss and anaemic condition and their "inherent tendency" to prey on men, were potential blood drinkers. The dualistic mind of the century which saw women extreme in good or extreme in evil conceived her as

(29) F. Harrison, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

(30) P. Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

(31) For example, Andrea Dworkin, Nina Auerbach, B. Dijkstra, and C. Craft. C. Craft, in his article "Kiss Me With Those Red Lips" (*Speaking of Gender*, ed. E. Showalter, Routledge, 1989), argues that in this text and "the gender - anxious culture from which it arose, an implicitly homoerotic desire achieves representation as a monstrous hetero-sexuality" (p. 219). As such, vampirism becomes a metaphor for (displaced) homosexual desire.

angel when she was good and vampire when bad. Her animal nature would emanate from the evil East or the primitive past and as such she would be the invading, intruding, threatening "other": Mysteriously dark, fatally dangerous - but also, irresistibly attractive!

Dracula's Daughters: More Powerful Than Their Father

"There have always existed Fatal Women both in mythology and in literature" says Mario Praz, because mythology and literature are "imaginative reflections of the various aspects of real life, and real life has always provided more or less complete examples of arrogant and cruel female characters."⁽³²⁾ But until the middle of the 19th century we do not see an established **type** of Fatal Woman: "For a type - which is in actual fact, a cliché - to be created, it is essential that some particular figure should have made a profound impression on the popular mind."⁽³³⁾ And that particular figure, which I think was the **New Woman**, had not yet established itself before the middle decades of the century.

N. Auerbach suggests that **Dracula** should be read as a nineties myth of newly empowered womanhood, whose two heroines are transformed from victims to instigators of their story: "In this literary myth, the apparently helpless woman assumes male, female and preternatural powers, taking away from the now paralyzed Dracula the magus' potency."⁽³⁴⁾ Lucy and Mina, the two leading female characters of the text, are Dracula's victims because **they invite** him. It is apparent that Lucy would be the first to go, because her interest in sex makes her an easy prey to dark forces. But what is more interesting is that a "sensible" and "kind" (as opposed to Lucy's sexual voraciousness) woman, a help-mate such as Mina can also be a victim of Dracula. Just being a woman is what makes her vulnerable to the vampire's bite and his potential collaborator. At this point Kristeva's "circle" symbolism becomes highly relevant. Kristeva argues that "if patriarchy sees women as occupying a marginal position within the symbolic order, then it can construe them as the **limit** or borderline of that order... they will be neither inside nor outside."⁽³⁵⁾ She points out that it is this position that has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos, and sometimes to elevate them as the representatives of a higher, purer nature: "In the first instance the borderline is seen as part of the chaotic wilderness and outside, and in the second it is seen as

(32) Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, Meridian Books, 1956, p. 188.

(33) *Ibid.*, p. 191.

(34) N. Auerbach, "Magi and the Maidens", *op. cit.*, 120.

(35) J. Kristeva as cited in T. Moi, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

an inherent part of the inside; the part that protects and shields the symbolic order from the imaginary chaos."⁽³⁶⁾ In Stoker's text Lucy is outside the circle and represents darkness and chaos, whereas Mina is just inside. But her position is never stable, she must be protected and circumscribed by men if she is to be avoided "stepping out". She can fight off Dracula only if she goes on to cooperate with and obey the rules of men. Men, on the other hand, try to protect Mina from Dracula's bite, which also signifies sexual intercourse and desire, by creating boundaries around her (by smearing garlic all around, or verbally by prayers and by the power of "science" as represented by Dr. Van Helsing). But desire is where the boundaries are broken, and Mina towards the end of the novel, breaks the boundaries and gets a taste of Dracula's blood proving she too is a daughter of Eve!

Victorian culture sought to suppress women by making myths of them, but as Auerbach points out, it also empowered the subjects it seemed to reduce: "Victorian womanhood is most delectable as a victim, but the victim consecrates herself into a queen with disturbing alacrity."⁽³⁷⁾ Social mythology has, indeed, an unpredictable life of its own!

The myth of womanhood in the late 19th century certainly contained contradictions, and behind this fact, lies the change that took place in gender relations and in the relative power of the two genders. Especially towards the end of the century the dialectic between womanhood and power was a central and general concern. The very fact of the existence of Queen Victoria forced men to question the relation between femininity and power. But the Victorian period did not only witness the reign of a female ruler, it was also a period when the principal battles of the female emancipation were fought, and sometimes won. The long-subdued power of women was beginning to assert itself. The feminist challenge was sweeping. It embraced education and occupation, together with legal, political and social status. It even dared broach the subject of equality in personal and especially matrimonial relationships⁽³⁸⁾.

The traditional concept of marriage with patriarchal husband and submissive wife, against which the feminists were rebelling, relied heavily for its preservation on a thriving economy. In this respect, it was no coincidence that the attack on the established sexual hierarchy gathered strength and proved most effective at a time when men were in a state of anxiety brought on by the instability of economy and of imperialist regression: "In

(36) *Ibid.*

(37) W. Auerbach, *op. cit.*, 1982, p. 35.

(38) C.E. Russett, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

a world full of uncertainty, change and upheaval, men needed women to trust them unconditionally. Therefore, any diversification from this rule was regarded as a threat to their identity and success."⁽³⁹⁾ C.E. Russett argues that female assertiveness was even more unsettling than the racial threat because it was more intimate and immediate as few white men lived with blacks while most lived with women. Scientists responded to this unrest with a detailed examination of the differences between men and women that justified their differing social roles⁽⁴⁰⁾.

Victorian myth of womanhood reflected in the periods's popular culture and sexual science, which seems to be part and parcel of that culture, therefore, may be seen as a response to the social environment. Myths do not spring just from the imagination as the imagination itself is shaped by historical and material conditions. The traditional concept of masculinity relied on an acceptance of the principle of female inferiority and it is only natural that men should have felt emasculated by the "aggression" of the **New Woman**. The artists and writers of the period tried to counter this female attack by portraying women as chained and helpless Andromedas waiting to be rescued by heroic Perseuses. Or better as Clyties, devoted to that archetypal male Apollo but ignored by him. These images seemed to remind their male **and** female audience what "true femininity" should be. True femininity lay, of course, in motherly altruism which was woman's special evolutionary responsibility. Everybody, even the men that declared themselves to be pro-feminist, was concerned with "the effect of woman's emancipation on her function of race-reproduction".⁽⁴¹⁾ Prolonged study could have ill-effects on women's child-bearing efficiency and thus lead to a physical degradation of the race. Women had to be protected against intellectual activity as they needed all their vital energy to have children. To think was to spend vital energy just as much as it took to give birth to a child. Hence man created in the intellectual realm, while women produced children. This was the order of things, and quite a fair division of "labour"!

But what if woman did not take on this role and refused to be "the fertile soil of humanity"? She would become cold, heartless and destructive. She would become Hedda Gabler.

(39) F. Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

(40) C.E. Russett, *op. cit.*, p. 10, and *passim*.

(41) Karl Pearson, as cited in C.E. Russett, *ibid*, p. 127.

Hedda Gabler: The Typical Phallic Woman

"I wish they all had but one body so
that we could burn them all at once, in
one fire."

Henri Boguet*

Ibsen's **Hedda Gabler** is very much a play about the power relations between genders and bears witness to its time. Karl Stern, a psychoanalyst writing in 1960s and keeping alive the spirit of the medieval doctors and Van Helplings of 19th century, writes that Hedda is a **type**, "a composite picture of all the **Hedda Gablers of clinical experience**" (my emphasis). And "the first thing that strikes us" when studying this type "is that since the [women's] emancipation, the phallic woman ceases to be a mythical projection and becomes a figure in the everyday fabric of life.. The phallic woman in the **Taming of the Shrew** presented a little sideshow. She was good for a laugh. By the end of the 19th century the thing had become deadly serious."⁽⁴²⁾ Who could laugh at Hedda, especially when she held those pistols? The witches and the sirens, the harpies and the gorgons, Scylla and the Sphinx were bad enough. But they were not half as bad as Hedda Gabler. She was the "real thing": A new era had begun, alas!

Karl Stern is right when he says Hedda is a type; indeed as a Fatal Woman **par excellence** she has taken the place of the Byronic hero that Mario Praz refers to and stands for all the other Heddas with whom by now "the stage of life was teeming." Like many feminists of the same period, Hedda Gabler who refuses to become man's helpmate, to complement his (in this case, Lövborg's) creative process by acting as his passive Muse is a nightmare for the dominant male ideology. For she not only lacks altruism - "every normal woman's generosity" in Dr. Stern's words- but she also competes with men, ultimately destroying him and his "child": Lövborg's manuscript. As such she is a menace to civilization.

Hedda is far too intelligent and assertive to accept the role of a helpmate but she cannot as yet find an outlet for her intelligence and talents, and I think her tragedy lies there. Her lust for life is frustrated by circumstances. Therefore, in her case, death becomes an act of will because the only real control she has is over her death. This concept of death is totally different than the one nurtured by the popular culture of the century where death is imaged as a woman's ultimate sacrifice of her being to a man, like Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott."

(*) *Discours des Sorciers*, quoted in S. Griffin, *Woman and Nature*, p. 83.

(42) Karl Stern, *The Flight from Woman*, George Allen & Unwin, 1966, p. 146.

Hedda Gabler is deadly dangerous, but her husband Jörgen Tesman still loves her; why? "Because" according to our Dr. Stern "he lacks maleness to the same degree to which Hedda lacks femininity. The two have found a **perverse** meeting ground."⁽⁴³⁾ (my emphasis). The **Femme Fatale** has an irresistible fascination and a desire to weaken the man. When the man "succumbs to fascination presented by the classical '**femme dominatrice et possessive**' of clinical experience, he allows himself to be the subject of a conquest... This kind of conquest is always experienced as destruction, as being sucked into something perilous."⁽⁴⁴⁾ Doctor Stern is warning his male audience against the perils of loving a non-submissive woman. Little seems to have changed since the days of the sorceresses of ancient Assyria, the **istaritus** and **kulmasitus**:

"Do not marry a prostitute whose husbands are legion
 An **istaritu** who is dedicated to a god,
 A **kulmasitu** whose favours are many.
 In your trouble she will not support you,
 In your dispute she will be a mocker,
 There is no reverence or submissiveness with her.
 Even if she dominates your house, get her out,
 For she has directed her attention elsewhere."⁽⁴⁵⁾

The search for the Fatal Woman is as fascinating as she, herself is. All those **istaritus**, **kulmasitus**, maenads, sirens, Liliths, Salomes, witches, vampires, Ayeshas, and Hedda Gablers capture our imagination and provide us with alternative images and possibilities of womanhood. Alright, they may not have been perfect, but nobody can deny that they were -at least- imaginative! So, as a "final word", I would like to drink to their memories all - and make sure that my cup is full of blood-red wine.

(43) *Ibid.*, p. 162.

(44) *Ibid.*, 155.

(45) From a collection of moral exhortations, as cited in Sue rollin, "Women and Witchcraft in Ancient Assyria" (A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt, eds., *op. cit.*,) p. 39.

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