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The Madwoman In The Attic” The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary imagination

SECOND EDITION SANDRA M. GILBERT and SUSAN GUBAR

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS NEW HAVEN AND LONDON 1979, 1984

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[Acknowledgements & Dedication] Epigraphs: The strife of thought, accusing and excusing, began afresh, and gathered fierceness. The soul of Lilith lay naked to the torture of pure interpenetrating inward light. She began to moan, and sigh deep sighs, then murmur as if holding colloquy with a dividual self: her queendom was no longer whole; it was divided against itself. ... At length she began what seemed a tale about herself, in a language so strange, and in forms so shadowy, that I could but here and there understand a little.

— George MacDonald, Lilith

It was not at first clear to me exactly what I was, except that I was someone who was being made to do certain things by someone else who was really the same person as myself — I have always called her Lilith. And yet the acts were mine, not Lilith’s.

—Laura Riding, “Eve’s Side of It”

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Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship

The man who does not know sick women does not know women.

— S. Weir Mitchell

I try to describe this long limitation, hoping that with such power as is now mine, and such use of language as is within that power, this will convince any one who cares about it that this “living” of mine had been done under a heavy handicap...

— Charlotte Perkins Gilman

A Word dropped careless on a Page May stimulate an eye When folded in perpetual seam The Wrinkled Maker lie

Infection in the sentence breeds, We may inhale Despair, At distances of Centuries, From the Malaria—

— Emily Dickinson

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I stand in the ring in the dead city and tie on the red shoes

They are not mine, they are my mother’s, her mother’s before, handed down like an heirloom but hidden like shameful letters. — Anne Sexton

What does it mean to be a woman writer in a culture whose fundamental definitions of literary authority are, as we have seen, both 45

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overtly and covertly patriarchal ? If the vexed and vexing polarities of angel and monster, sweet dumb Snow White and fierce mad Queen, are major images literary tradition offers women, how does such imagery influence the ways in which women attempt the pen? If the Queen’s looking glass speaks with the King’s voice, how do its perpetual kingly admonitions affect the Queen’s own voice? Since his is the chief voice she hears, does the Queen try to sound like the King, imitating his tone, his inflections, his phrasing, his point of view? Or does she “talk back” to him in her own vocabulary, her own timbre, insisting on her own viewpoint? We believe these are basic questions feminist literary criticism — both theoretical and practical — must answer, and consequently they are questions to which we shall turn again and again, not only in this chapter but in all our readings of nineteenth-century literature by women.

That writers assimilate and then consciously or unconsciously affirm or deny the achievements of their predecessors is, of course, a central fact of literary history, a fact whose aesthetic and metaphysical implications have been discussed in detail by theorists as diverse as T. S. Eliot, M. H. Abrams, Erich Auerbach, and Frank Kermode. 1 More recently, some literary theorists have begun to explore what we might call the psychology of literary history — the tensions and anxieties, hostilities and inadequacies writers feel when they confront not only the achievements of their predecessors but the traditions of genre, style, and metaphor that they inherit from such “forefathers.” Increasingly, these critics study the ways in which, as J. Hillis Miller has put it, a literary text “is inhabited ... by a long chain of parasitical presences, echoes, allusions, guests, ghosts of previous texts.” [2].

As Miller himself also notes, the first and foremost student of such literary psychohistory has been Harold Bloom. Applying Freudian structures to literary genealogies, Bloom has postulated that the dynamics of literary history arise- from the artist’s “anxiety of influence,” his fear that he is not his own creator and that the works of his predecessors, existing before and beyond him, assume essential priority over his own writings. In fact, as we pointed out in our discussion of the metaphor of literary paternity, Bloom’s paradigm of the sequential historical relationship between literary artists is the relationship of father and son, specifically that relationship as it

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was defined by Freud. Thus Bloom explains that a “strong poet” must engage in heroic warfare with his “precursor,” for, involved as he is in a literary Oedipal struggle, a man can only become a poet by somehow invalidating his poetic father.

Bloom’s model of literary history is intensely (even exclusively) male, and necessarily patriarchal. For this reason it has seemed, and no doubt will continue to seem, offensively sexist to some feminist critics. Not only, after all, does Bloom describe literary history as the crucial warfare of fathers and sons, he sees Milton’s fiercely masculine fallen Satan as the type of the poet in our culture, and he metaphorically defines the poetic process as a sexual encounter between a male poet and his female muse. Where, then, does the female poet fit in? Does she want to annihilate a “forefather” or a “fbremother” ? What if she can find no models, no precursors? Does she have a muse, and what is its sex? Such questions are inevitable in any female consideration of Bloomian poetics. [3]. And yet, from a feminist perspective, their inevitability may be just the point; it may, that is, call our attention not to what is wrong about Bloom’s conceptualization of the dynamics of Western literary history, but to what is right (or at least suggestive) about his theory.

For Western literary history is overwhelmingly male — or, more accurately, patriarchal — and Bloom analyzes and explains this fact, while other theorists have ignored it, precisely, one supposes, because they assumed literature had to be male. Like Freud, whose psychoanalytic postulates permeate Bloom’s literary psychoanalyses of the “anxiety of influence,” Bloom has defined processes of interaction that his predecessors did not bother to consider because, among other reasons, they were themselves so caught up in such processes.

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Like Freud, too, Bloom has insisted on bringing to consciousness assumptions readers and writers do not ordinarily examine. In doing so, he has clarified the implications of the psychosexual and sociosexual con-texts by which every literary text is surrounded, and thus the meanings of the “guests” and “ghosts” which inhabit texts themselves. Speaking of Freud, the feminist theorist Juliet Mitchell has remarked that “psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society, but an analysis of one.” [4]. The same sort of statement could be made about Bloom’s model of literary history, which is not a

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recommendation for but an analysis of the patriarchal poetics (and attendant anxieties) which underlie our culture’s chief literary movements.

For our purposes here, however, Bloom’s historical construct is useful not only because it helps identify and define the patriarchal psychosexual context in which so much Western literature was authored, but also because it can help us distinguish the anxieties and achievements of female writers from those of male writers. If we return to the question we asked earlier — where does a woman writer “fit in” to the overwhelmingly and essentially male literary history Bloom describes? — we find we have to answer that a woman writer does not “fit in.” At first glance, indeed, she seems to be anomalous, indefinable, alienated, a freakish outsider. Just as in Freud’s theories of male and female psychosexual development there is no symmetry between a boy’s growth and a girl’s (with, say. the male “Oedipus complex” balanced by a female “Electra complex”) so Bloom’s male-oriented theory of the “anxiety of influence” cannot be simply reversed or inverted in order to account for the situation of the woman writer.

Certainly if we acquiesce in the patriarchal Bloomian model, we can be sure that the female poet does not experience the “anxiety of influence” in the same way that her male counterpart would, for the simple reason that she must confront precursors who are almost exclusively male, and therefore significantly different from her. Not only do these precursors incarnate patriarchal authority (as our discussion of the metaphor of literary paternity argued), they attempt to enclose her in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her own sense of her self — that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity. On the one hand, therefore, the woman writer’s male precursors symbolize authority; on the other hand, despite their authority, they fail to define the ways in which she experiences her own identity as a writer. More, the masculine authority with which they construct their literary personae, as well as the fierce power struggles in which they engage in their efforts of self-creation, seem to the woman writer direcdy to contradict the terms of her own gender definition. Thus the “anxiety of influence” that a male poet experiences is felt by a female poet as an even more

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primary “anxiety of authorship” — a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a “precursor” the act of writing will isolate or destroy her.

This anxiety is, of course, exacerbated by her fear that not only can she not fight a male precursor on “his” terms and win, she cannot “beget” art upon the (female) body of the muse. As Juliet Mitchell notes, in a concise summary of the implications Freud’s theory of psychosexual development has for women, both a boy and a girl, “as they learn to speak and live within society, want to take the father’s [in Bloom’s terminology the precursor’s] place, and only the boy will one day be allowed to do so. Furthermore both sexes are born into the desire of the mother, and as, through cultural heritage, what the mother desires is the phallus-turned-baby, both children desire to be the phallus for the mother. Again, only the boy can fully recognize himself in his mother’s desire. Thus both sexes repudiate the implications of femininity,” but the girl learns (in relation to her father) “that her subjugation to the law of the father entails her becoming the representative of ‘nature’ and ‘sexuality,’ a chaos of spontaneous, intuitive creativity.” [5].

Unlike her male counterpart, then, the female artist must first struggle against the effects of a socialization which makes conflict with the will of her (male) precursors seem inexpressibly absurd, futile, or even — as in the case of the Queen in “Little Snow White” — self-annihilating. And just as the male artist’s struggle against his precursor takes the form of what Bloom calls revisionary swerves, flights, misreadings, so the female writer’s battle for self-creation involves her in a revisionary process. Her battle, however, is not against her (male) precursor’s reading of the world but against his reading of her. In order to define herself as an author she must redefine the terms of her socialization.

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Her revisionary struggle, therefore, often becomes a struggle for what Adrienne Rich has called “Revision — the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction ... an act of survival.”\* Frequently, moreover, she can begin such a struggle only by actively seeking a female precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible. For this reason, as well as for the sound psychoanalytic reasons especially when women’s struggles for literary self-creation are seen in the psychosexual context described by Bloom’s Freudian theories of patrilineal literary inheritance.

— ardaFemm -

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Mitchell and others give, it would be foolish to locF \ artist j struct 11 ri\* into an Electra pattern matching the Oedipaf, Bloom c i • tu •\* -and we sk „ proposes for male writers. The woman writer— ¦ r >all see women doing this over and over again — searches r \* model not because she wants dutifully to comply with f^ ‘‘ions of rficr own rf\*L her “femininity” but because she must legitimize r .bilious endeavors. At the same time, like most women in j/ \*ociety, the woman writer does experience her gender as r P Wade, or even a debilitating inadequacy ; like most patriar^ . ^ ‘‘‘tioned women, in other words, she is victimized by what r ^Is “the inferiorized and ‘alternative’ (second sex) psycholo^r , \*’> under patriarchy.” 7 Thus the loneliness of the female ar^ ‘ \*’ings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with h^ »isterly precursors and successors, her urgent sense of her female audience together with her fear of the antagonist .Naders, her culturally conditioned timidity about self-d’ . ^n, her dread of the patriarchal authority of art, her / nxie ^ „. ‘ut the impropriety of female invention — all these phenol . ‘leriorization” mark the woman writer’s struggle for aw “ \*’inition and differentiate her efforts at self-creation from \*f male counterpart.

As we shall see, such sociosexual diflerentiatk/ . . . ^at, as Elaine Showalter has suggested, women writers par 7 “ \* quite different literary subculture from that inhabited t” . f ‘ters, a subculture which has its own distinctive literary ‘ ‘ \*ven —though it defines itself in relation to the “main,” “ ‘nated, literary culture — a distinctive history. 8 At best, tf P ‘‘hess of this female subculture has been exhilarating for \*\*[ , “‘ ? recent years, for instance, while male writers seem increa^ ° ‘ “tve felt exhausted by the need for revisionism which Blcx? \* .of the “anxiety of influence” accurately describes, wor \ have . , . . . . • . \*e that thcL seen themselves as pioneers in a creativity so intend . <r male counterparts have probably not experienced its ° ^ce the \_ . r , ¦ , „ The son of Renaissance, or at least since the Romantic era. ... many fathers, today’s male writer feels hopelessly belated ‘ . ^hter of too few mothers, today’s female writer feels that . hing to create a viable tradition which is at last definitivel/ ° &• There is a darker side of this female literary sub cu urc ‘ ^Wever,

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As we noted above, for an “anxiety of influence” the woman writer substitutes what we have called an “anxiety of authorship,” an anxiety built from complex and often only barely conscious fears of that authority which seems to the female artist to be by definition inappropriate to her sex. Because it is based on the woman’s socially determined sense of her own biology, this anxiety of authorship is quite distinct from the anxiety about creativity that could be traced in such male writers as Hawthorne or Dostoevsky. Indeed, to the extent that it forms one of the unique bonds that link women in what we might call the secret sisterhood of their literary subculture, such anxiety in itself constitutes a crucial mark of that subculture.

In comparison to the “male” tradition of strong, father-son combat, however, this female anxiety of authorship is profoundly debilitating. Handed down not from one woman to another but from the stern literary “fathers” of patriarchy to all their “inferiorized” female descendants, it is in many ways the germ of a disease or, at any rate, a disaffection, a disturbance, a distrust, that spreads like a stain throughout the style and structure of much literature by women, especially — as we shall see in this study — throughout literature by women before the twentieth century. For if contemporary women do now attempt the pen with energy and authority, they are able to do so only because their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century foremothers struggled in isoladon that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis to overcome the anxiety of authorship that was endemic to their literary subculture. Thus, while the recent feminist emphasis on positive role models has undoubtedly helped many women, it should not keep us from realizing the terrible odds against which a creative female subculture was established. Far from reinforcing socially oppressive sexual stereotyping, only a full consideration of such problems can reveal the extraordinary strength of women’s literary accomplishments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Emily Dickinson’s acute observations about “infection in the sentence,” quoted in our epigraphs, resonate in a number of different ways, then, for women writers, given the literary woman’s special concept of her place in literary psychohistory. To begin with, the words seem to indicate Dickinson’s keen consciousness that, in the purest Bloomian or Millerian sense, pernicious “guests” and “ghosts” inhabit all literary texts. For any reader, but especially for a reader who is also a writer, every text can become a “sentence” or weapon in a kind of metaphorical germ warfare. Beyond this, however, the fact that “infection in the sentence breeds” suggests Dickinson’s recognition that literary texts are coercive, imprisoning, fever-inducing; that, since literature usurps a reader’s interiority, it is an invasion of privacy. Moreover, given Dickinson’s own gender definition, the sexual ambiguity of her poem’s “Wrinkled Maker” is significant. For while, on the one hand, “we” (meaning especially women writers) “may inhale Despair” from all those patriarchal texts which seek to deny female autonomy and authority, on the other hand “we” (meaning especially women writers) “may inhale Despair” from all those “foremothers” who have both overtly and covertly conveyed their traditional authorship anxiety to their bewildered female descendants. Finally, such traditional, metaphorically matrilineal anxiety ensures that even the maker of a text, when she is a woman, may feel imprisoned within texts — folded and “wrinkled” by their pages and thus trapped in their “perpetual seam[s]” which perpetually tell her how she seems.

Although contemporary women writers are relatively free of the infection of this “Despair” Dickinson defines (at least in comparison to their nineteenth-century precursors), an anecdote recently related by the American poet and essayist Annie Gottlieb summarizes our point about the ways in which, for all women, “Infection in the sentence breeds”:

When I began to enjoy my powers as a writer, 1 dreamt that my mother had me sterilized! (Even in dreams we still blame our mothers for the punitive choices our culture forces on us.) I went after the mother-figure in my dream, brandishing a large knife; on its blade was writing. I cried, “Do you know what you are doing? You are destroying my femaleness, my female power, which is important to me because ofyouV 9

Seeking motherly precursors, says Gottlieb, as if echoing Dickinson, the woman writer may find only infection, debilitation.

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Yet still she must seek, not seek to subvert, her “female power, which is important” to her because of her lost literary matriiineage. In this connection, Dickinson’s own words about mothers are revealing, for she alternately claimed that “I never had a mother,” that “I always ran Home to Awe as a child. ... He was an awful Mother but I liked him better than none,” and that “a mother [was] a miracle.” 10 Yet, as we shall see, her own anxiety of authorship was a “Despair” inhaled not only from the infections suffered by her own ailing physical mother, and her many tormented literary mothers, but from the literary fathers who spoke to her — even “lied” to her — sometimes near at hand, sometimes “at distances of Centuries,” from the censorious looking glasses of literary texts.

It is debilitating to be any woman in a society where women are warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters. Recendy, in fact, social scientists and social historians like Jessie Bernard, Phyllis Chesler, Naomi Weisstein, and Pauline Bart have begun to study the ways in which patriarchal socialization literally makes women sick, both physically and mentally. 11 Hysteria, the disease with which Freud so famously began his investigations into the dynamic connections between psyche and soma, is by definition a “female disease,” not so much because it takes its name from the Greek word for womb, hyster (the organ which was in the nineteenth century supposed to “cause” this emotional disturbance), but because hysteria did occur mainly among women in turn-of-the-century Vienna, and because throughout the nineteenth century this mental illness, like many other nervous disorders, was thought to be caused by the female reproductive system, as if to elaborate upon Aristotle’s nodon that femaleness was in and of itself a deformity . ta And, indeed, such diseases of maladjustment to the physical and social environment as anorexia and agoraphobia did and do strike a disproportionate number of women. Sufferers from anorexia — loss of appetite, selfstarvadon — are primarily adolescent girls. Sufferers from agoraphobia — fear of open or “public” places — are usually female, most frequendy middle-aged housewives, as are sufferers from crippling rheumatoid arthritis [13].

Such diseases are caused by patriarchal socialization in several ways.

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Most obviously, of course, any young girl, but especially a lively or imaginative one, is likely to experience her education in docility, submissiveness, self-lessness as in some sense sickening. To be trained in renunciation is almost necessarily to be trained to ill health, since the human animal’s first and strongest urge is to his/her own survival, pleasure, assertion. In addition, each of the “subjects” in which a young girl is educated may be sickening in a specific way. Learning to become a beautiful object, the girl learns anxiety about — perhaps even loathing of — her own flesh. Peering obsessively into the real as well as metaphoric looking glasses that surround her, she desires literally to “reduce” her own body. In the nineteenth century, as we noted earlier, this desire to be beautiful and “frail” led to tightlacing and vinegar-drinking. In our own era it has spawned innumerable diets and “controlled” fasts, as well as the extraordinary phenomenon of teenage anorexia [14]. Similarly, it seems inevitable that women reared for, and conditioned to, lives of privacy, reticence, domesticity, might develop pathological fears of public places and unconfined spaces. Like the comb, stay-laces, and apple which the Queen in “Little Snow White” uses as weapons against her hated stepdaughter, such afflictions as anorexia and agoraphobia simply carry patriarchal definitions of “femininity” to absurd extremes, and thus function as essential or at least inescapable parodies of social prescriptions.

In the nineteenth century, however, the complex of social prescriptions these diseases parody did not merely urge women to act in ways which would cause them to become ill; nineteenth-century culture seems to have actually admonished women to be ill. In other words, the “female diseases” from which Victorian women suffered were not always byproducts of their training in femininity; they were the goals of such training. As Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English have shown, throughout much of the nineteenth century “Upperand upper-middle-class women were [defined as] ‘sick’ [frail, ill]; working-class women were [defined as] ‘sickening’ [infectious, diseased].” Speaking of the “lady,” they go on to point out that “Society agreed that she was frail and sickly,” and consequently a “cult of female invalidism” developed in England and America.

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For the products of such a cult, it was, as Dr. Mary Putnam Jacobi wrote in 1895, “considered natural and almost laudable to break down under all conceivable varieties of strain — a winter dissipation, a houseful of servants, a quarrel with a female friend, not to speak of more legitimate reasons.

... Constandy considering their nerves, urged to consider them by well-intentioned but short-sighted advisors, [women] pretty soon become nothing but a bundle of nerves.” [15]

Given this socially conditioned epidemic of female illness, it is not surprising to find that the angel in the house of literature frequently suffered not just from fear and trembling but from literal and figurative sicknesses unto death. Although her hyperactive stepmother dances herself into the grave, after all, beautiful Snow White has just barely recovered from a catatonic trance in her glass coffin. And if we return to Goethe’s Makarie, the “good” woman of Wilhelm Meister’s Travels whom Hans Eichner has described as incarnadng her author’s ideal of “contempladve purity,” we find that this “model of selflessness and of purity of heart ... this embodiment of das Ewig-Weibliche, suffers from migraine headaches.” [16] Implying ruthless self-suppression, does the “eternal feminine” necessarily imply illness? If so, we may have found yet another meaning for Dickinson’s assertion that “Infection in the sentence breeds.” The despair we “inhale” even “at distances of centuries” may be the despair of a life like Makarie’s, a life that “has no story.”

At the same time, however, the despair of the monster-woman is also real, undeniable, and infectious. The Queen’s mad tarantella is plainly unhealthy and metaphorically the result of too much storytelling. As the Romantic poets feared, too much imagination may be dangerous to anyone, male or female, but for women in particular patriarchal culture has always assumed mental exercises would have dire consequences. In 1645 John Winthrop, the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, noted in his journal that Anne Hopkins “has fallen into a sad infirmity, the loss of her understanding and reason, which had been growing upon her divers years, by occasion of her giving herself wholly to reading and writing, and had written many books,” adding that “if she had attended her household affairs, and such things as belong to women ... she had kept her wits.” [17] And as Wendy Martin has noted in the nineteenth century this fear of the intellectual woman became so intense that the phenomenon ... was recorded in medical annals.

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A thinking woman was considered such a breach of nature that a Harvard doctor reported during his autopsy on a Radcliffe graduate he discovered that her uterus had shrivelled to the size of a pea. [1 \*]

If, then, as Anne Sexton suggests (in a poem parts of which we have also used here as an epigraph), the red shoes passed furtively down from woman to woman are the shoes of art, the Queen’s dancing shoes, it is as sickening to be a Queen who wears them as it is to be an angelic Makarie who repudiates them. Several passages in Sexton’s verse express what we have defined as “anxiety of authorship” in the form of a feverish dread of the suicidal tarantella of female creativity:

All those girls

who wore red shoes,

each boarded a train that would not stop.

They tore off their ears like safety pins.

Their arms fell off them and became hats.

Their heads rolled off and sang down the street.

And their feet — oh God, their feet in the market place —

... the feet went on.

The feet could not stop.

They could not listen.

They could not stop.

What they did was the death dance.

What they did would do them in.

Certainly infection breeds in these sentences, and despair: female art, Sexton suggests, has .a “hidden” but crucial tradition of uncontrollable madness. Perhaps it was her semi-conscious perception of this tradition that gave Sexton herself “a secret fear” of being “a reincarnation” of Edna Millay, whose reputation seemed based on romance. In a letter to DeWitt Snodgrass she confessed that she had “a fear of writing as a woman writes,” adding, “I wish I were a man

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— I would rather write the way a man writes.” l \* After all, dancing the death dance, “all those girb / who wore the red shoes” dismantle their own bodies, like anorexics renouncing the guilty weight of their female flesh. But if their arms, ears, and heads fall off, perhaps their wombs, too, will “shrivel” to “the size of a pea”?

In this connection, a passage from Margaret Atwood’s Lady Oracle acts almost as a gloss on the conflict between creativity and “femininity” which Sexton’s violent imagery embodies (or dis-embodies). Significantly, the protagonist of Atwood’s novel is a writer of the sort of fiction that has recently been called “female gothic,” and even more significantly she too projects her anxieties of authorship into the fairy-tale metaphor of the red shoes. Stepping in glass, she sees blood on her feet, and suddenly feels that she has discovered.

The real red shoes, the feet punished for dancing. You could dance, or you could have the love of a good man. But you were afraid to dance, because you had this unnatural fear that if you danced they’d cut your feet off so you wouldn’t be able to dance... Finally you overcame your fear and danced, and they cut your feet off. The good man went away too, because you wanted to dance [20].

Whether she is a passive angel or an active monster, in other words, the woman writer feels herself to be literally or figuratively crippled by the debilitating alternatives her culture offers her, and the crippling effects of her conditioning sometimes seem to “breed” like sentences of death in the bloody shoes she inherits from her literary foremothers.

Surrounded as she is by images of disease, traditions of disease, and invitations both to disease and to dis-ease, it is no wonder that the woman writer has held many mirrors up to the discomforts of her own nature. As we shall see, the notion that “Infection in the sentence breeds” has been so central a truth for literary women that the great artistic achievements of nineteenth-century novelists and poets from Austen and Shelley to Dickinson and Barrett Browning are often both literally and figuratively concerned with disease, as if to emphasize the effort with which health and wholeness were won from the infectious “vapors” of despair and fragmentation.

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Rejecting the poisoned apples her culture offers her, the woman writer often becomes in some sense ¦ anorexic, resolutely closing her mouth on silence (since — in the words of Jane Austen’s Henry Tilney — “a woman’s only power is the power of refusal” 21), even while she complains of starvation. Thus both Charlotte and Emily Bronte depict the travails of starved or starving anorexic heroines, while Emily Dickinson declares in one breath that she “had been hungry, all the Years,” and in another opts for “Sumptuous Destitution.” Similarly, Christina Rossetd represents her own anxiety of authorship in the split between one heroine who longs to “suck and suck” on goblin fruit and another who locks her lips fiercely together in a gesture of silent and passionate renunciation. In addition, many of these literary women become in one way or another agoraphobic. Trained to redcence, they fear the vertiginous openness of the literary marketplace and rationalize with Emily Dickinson that “Publication — is the Auction /Of the Mind of Man” or, worse, punningly confess that “Creation seemed a mighty Crack — /To make me visible.” [\*\*]

As we shall also see, other diseases and dis-eases accompany the two classic symptoms of anorexia and agoraphobia. Claustrophobia, for instance, agoraphobia’s parallel and complementary opposite, is a disturbance we shall encounter again and again in women’s writing throughout the nineteenth century. Eye “troubles,” moreover, seem to abound in the lives and works of literary women, with Dickinson matter-of-factly noting that her eye got “put out,” George Eliot describing patriarchal Rome as “a disease of the redna,” Jane Eyre and Aurora Leigh marrying blind men, Charlotte Bronte deliberately writing with her eyes closed, and Mary Elizabeth Coleridge writing about “Blindness” that came because “Absolute and bright, /The Sun’s rays smote me ull they masked the Sun.” [\* 3] Finally, aphasia and amnesia — two illnesses which symbolically represent (and parody) the sort of intellectual incapacity patriarchal culture has traditionally required of women — appear and reappear in women’s writings in frankly stated or disguised forms. “Foolish” women characters in Jane Austen’s novels (Miss Bates in Emma, for instance) express Malapropish confusion about language, while Mary Shelley’s monster has to learn language from scratch and Emily Dickinson herself childishly quesdons the meanings of the most basic English words: “Will there really be a ‘Morning’? /Is there such a thing as ‘Day’?” [\* 4].

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At the same time, many women writers manage to imply that the reason for such ignorance of language — as well as the reason for their deep sense of alienation and inescapable feeling of anomie — is that they have forgotten something. Deprived of the power that even their pens don’t seem to confer, these women resemble Doris Lessing’s heroines, who have to fight their internalization of patriarchal strictures for even a faint trace memory of what they might have become.

“Where are the songs I used to know, / Where are the notes I used to sing?” writes Christina Rossetti in “The Key-Note,” a poem whose title indicates its significance for her. “I have forgotten everything / 1 used to know so long ago.” [26] As if to make the same point, Charlotte Bronte’s Lucy Snowe conveniently “forgets” her own history and even, so it seems, the Christian name of one of the central characters in her story, while Bronte’s orphaned Jane Eyre seems to have lost (or symbolically “forgotten”) her family heritage. Similarly, too, Emily Bronte’s Heathclift “forgets” or is made to forget who and what he was; Mary Shelley’s monster is “born” without either a memory or a family history; and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh is early separated from — and thus induced to “forget” — her “mother land” of Italy. As this last example suggests, however, what all these characters and their authors really fear they have forgotten is precisely that aspect of their lives which has been kept from them by patriarchal poetics: their matrilineal heritage of literary strength, their “female power” which, as Annie Gottlieb wrote, is important to them because of (not in spite of) their mothers. In order, then, not only to understand the ways in which “Infection in the sentence breeds” for women but also to learn how women have won through disease to artistic health we must begin by redefining Bloom’s seminal definitions of the revisionary “anxiety of influence.” In doing so, we will have to trace the difficult paths by which nineteenth-century women overcame their “anxiety of authorship,” repudiated debilitating patriarchal prescriptions, and recovered or remembered the lost foremothers who could help them find their distinctive female power.

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To begin with, those women who were among the first of their sex to attempt the pen were evidently infected or sickened by just the feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, and inferiority that their education in “femininity” almost seems to have been designed to induce. The necessary converse of the metaphor of literary paternity, as we noted in our discussion of that phenomenon, was a belief in female literary sterility, a belief that caused literary women like Anne Finch to consider with deep anxiety the possibility that they might be “Cyphers,” powerless intellectual eunuchs. In addition, such women were profoundly affected by the sort of assumptions that underly an assertion like Rufus Griswold’s statement that in reading women’s writing “We are in danger ... of mistaking for the efflorescent energy of creative intelligence, that which is only the exuberance of personal ‘feelings unemployed.’” [\*\*]. Even if it was not absurd for a woman to try to write, this remark implies, perhaps it was somehow sick or what we would today call “neurotic.” “We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us,” says Austen’s Anne Elliot to Captain Harville, not long before they embark upon the debate about the male pen and its depiction of female “inconstancy” which we discussed earlier. She speaks in what Austen describes as “a low, feeling voice,” and her remarks as well as her manner suggest both her own and her author’s acquiescence in the notion that women may be more vulnerable than men to the dangers and diseases of “feelings unemployed.” [27]

It is not surprising, then, that one of Finch’s best and most passionate poems is an ambitious Pindaric ode entitled “The Spleen.” Here, in what might almost be a response to Pope’s characterization of the Queen of Spleen in The Rape of the Lock, Finch confesses and explores her own anxiety about the “vaporous” illness whose force, she feared, ruled her life and art. Her self-examination is particularly interesting not only because of its rigorous honesty, but because that honesty compels her to reveal just how severely she herself has been influenced by the kinds of misogynistic strictures about women’s “feelings unemployed” that Pope had embedded in his poem. Thus Pope insists that the “wayward Queen” of Spleen rules “the sex to fifty from fifteen” — rules women, that is, throughout their “prime” of female sexuality — and is therefore the “parent” of both hysteria and (female) poetry, and Finch seems at least in part to agree, for she notes that “In the Imperious Wife thou Vapours art.”

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That is, insubordinate women’ are merely, as Pope himself would have thought, neurotic women. “Lordly Man [is] born to Imperial Sway,” says Finch, but he is defeated by splenetic woman; he “Compounds for Peace ... And Woman, arm’d with Spleen, do’s servilely Obey.” At the same time, however, Finch admits that she feels the most pernicious effects of Spleen within herself, and specifically within herself as an artist, and she complains