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ONE

MONSTROUS MOTHERS

Women Over the Top

Queen Victoria opened the first dinosaur theme park at Sydenham in South London in 1852. She presided over the unveiling of twenty-nine full-scale models made by Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins, who was the draughtsman Darwin himself had employed to depict the animals he found on his voyage in the *Beagle*. The word 'dinosaur'—dread lizard—had been coined in 1841 by the leading palaeontologist of the time, Richard Owen, and Hawkins made his dinosaurs to Owen's state-of-the-art specifications.

Spick and span signs in gold and scarlet paint direct visitors to the park today to the 'Farmyard—Boats—and—Monsters'. Monsters, not dinosaurs: the distinction between natural history and myth wasn't drawn then. There, on an island in a lake,

crouching under mixed plantings of large trees, the concrete creatures come into view: the pterodactyl spreads its wings like a large heron, the snout of the mosasaurus emerges from the water like the toothy maw of Jonah's whale in a medieval illumination, ichthyosaurus with daisywheel eyes seems to waddle on fins as comfortably as a walrus. Their inertia in the suburban London park is pastoral, reassuring: dinosaurs spending the afternoon at their club in St James'.

A hundred and forty years on, in a much more famous park, the dinosaurs are living, moving, crying, talking—almost—the simulations and models in *Jurassic Park* give a glow of genuine wonder to the film. But the distant past and the immediate present converge in the plot to make the primordial visible in another, metaphorical way: the dinosaurs are presented as authentic forerunners in time, scientifically accurate, but at the same time their character has evolved to embody contemporary fantasies.

The velociraptors, as they hop and scurry and pounce and give chase, suspend disbelief even in the most cynical of viewers; small, mobile, quick on their feet, hunting in pairs and even articulate, they represent rather a change from the lumbering dinosaurs of Sydenham Park. In my childhood, *Tyrannosaurus rex* was the only carnivore then taught in the classroom, and even he didn't possess the savage tenacity, nimble skills, and mental energy of these predators in *Jurassic Park*. Dinosaurs, even called monsters, seemed benign giants then, but today they've become cunning, voracious, nippy—and female.

Michael Crichton's clever plot holds much interest for students of myths today. First, femaleness, via such media as this film, is represented as the sex of origin, the scientists tell us: you have to add a Y chromosome to the original DNA to generate a male of the species. Keep it back, and life is viable, and female.

Originally grown, as everyone knows, from the DNA in blood found in a mosquito preserved in amber, the dinosaurs epitomise the chaotic natural energy of fertility governed by the secular priests of the temple of science. They were all made female so that they couldn't breed, and therefore could be controlled.

In this, the dystopic theme park mirrors our world: one of the scientists marvels, 'life found a way', when sure enough, the all-female population begins to breed—by craftily mutating some ambidextrous frog DNA. Thus female organisms, in the film, prove ultimately uncontrollably fertile, resistant to all the constraints of the men of power. The story can be reduced to a naked confrontation between nature-coded female with culture-coded male: the bristling, towering, jagged, megavolt fence cannot hold the force of the primeval at a stage of intelligent evolution. Velociraptors collaborate on the kill—one as decoy, one as executioner—and want nothing more than to snack on human flesh. It's not incidental that the final confrontation takes place between a picture-perfect nuclear family—mum, dad, boy, girl—and the two velociraptors on the rampage, and that the outcome of the feeble romantic interest is that the surviving palaeontologist decides to accept his role as a man and become the father of a family.

Is the terror the velociraptors inspire in any way connected to their femaleness? It isn't emphasised as such—though the book calls the park a matriarchy. Yet popular films of this kind often refract popular concerns in metaphorical terms, and then reinforce them. No director of the contemporary cinema rivals Steven Spielberg's ability to touch a common chord. He broke all records with the takings on *E.T.* and now, a decade later, has outstripped them with *Jurassic Park*, which has made over $900 million worldwide.

The deadly female predator prowls in many other popular artefacts, in the film *Fatal Attraction,* in Margaret Atwood's latest novel, *The Robber Bride;* the two velociraptors at the climax of *Jurassic Park* could well be called Thelma and Louise—after a bout of hellraising, there's nowhere else for the story to take them but death. All such she-monsters must in one way or another be despatched by the plot—or by the hero—as securely as any mythological dragon or monster of classical myth—preferably before they've perpetuated themselves.

The accelerating pace of change since the Fifties has magnified the influence, the power, and the dissemination of myths. As everything changes, from the political map to the distribution of wealth, as human ingenuity leads to scientific breakthroughs which offer salvation and, at the same time, destruction, as strains on the family grow, the imagination hunts for stories to explain the pervasive malaise. One of the stories in mass circulation today is a very old one, but it's taken on new vigour: women in general are out of control, and feminism in particular is to blame. It's odd to think that misogynist jokes are used to attack women for wanting to trap men into marriage. Now, the attacks run the opposite way. The tabloids bitterly quote young mothers who say, 'So who needs men?'

Feminism today has become a bogey, a whipping boy, routinely produced to explain all social ills: women's struggle for equality of choice in matters of sex, their grasp of sovereignty over their bodies, are blamed in particular for the rise in family breakdown, the increase of divorce, and the apparently spiralling delinquency and violence of children. In these lectures, I'll be looking at the mythic accretions clustering stickily to these themes. Men are no longer in control, mothers are not what they used to be, and it's the fault of Germaine Greer, *Cosmopolitan*

and headlined stars who choose to be single mothers, like Michelle Pfeiffer. By holding up to the light modern mythical nodes of this kind I hope to loosen, in some cases, their binding grip on our imagination. Replying to one story with another which unravels the former has become central to contemporary thought and art—text as well as image. The idea of a kind of cultural *kontakion,* the Greek antiphonal chorus across the nave, of response and reply, invocation and challenge, opens a new angle of view. As Jessica Rabbit says, in the film about her husband, 'I'm not really bad. I'm just drawn that way.'

The she-monster's hardly a new phenomenon. The idea of a female, untamed nature which must be leashed, or else will wreak havoc, closely reflects anthropocentric and mythological encounters with monsters, in spite of the hard scientific credentials of the advisers on the film. Greek myth alone offers a host of Keres, Harpies, Sirens, Moirae. Associated with fate and death in various ways, they move swiftly, sometimes on wings; birds of prey are their closest kin—the Greeks didn't know about dinosaurs—and they seize, as in the word raptor. But seizure also describes the effect of the passions on the body; inner forces, Lussa—Madness—Ate—Folly—personified in Homer and the tragedies as feminine, snatch and grab the interior of the human creature and take possession.

Ungoverned energy in the female always raises the issue of motherhood and the extent of maternal authority; fear that the natural bond excludes men and eludes their control courses through ancient myth, which applies various remedies. In Aeschylus's *Oresteia,* when Orestes has murdered his mother, Clytemnestra, the matriarchal Furies want justice against the matricide—but they find themselves confronting a new order—led by the god Apollo. Orestes is declared innocent, in a famous

resolution which still has power to shock audiences today. The god decrees:

> The mother of what's called her offspring's no parent
> but only the nurse to the seed that's implanted.
> The mounter, the male's the only true parent.
> She harbours the bloodshoot, unless some god blasts it.
> The womb of the woman's a convenient transit.

In this brutal act of legislation, the god of harmony declares that henceforward, in civilised society, only the father counts. The mother only acts as an incubator.

The urban hero, representative of his paternal lineage as well as of culture and the city, subdues elemental she-monsters like the hundred-headed Hydra or the snaky-haired Medusa with his military might, and sometimes—as in the case of Odysseus and the Sphinx—with the shamanistic insight which will win him kingship. The spectre of gynocracy, of rule by women, stalks through the founding myths of our culture: both Theseus and Hercules fight with the Amazons—and subdue their queens. The Amazons' separatist queendom made them tantalising but also monstrous in the eyes of the Greeks; the terrible massacres of their army depicted on stone reliefs and vases redounded to the fame of the Greek heroes as surely as cutting off Medusa's head.

In the folklore of the past, classical and medieval, the female beast, like the velociraptors, was sometimes cunning—and purposely concealed her true nature: the hero only learns that his beautiful lover Mélusine turns into a serpent at the weekend by peeping at her; the Sirens lured men with their deceitful songs, and later tempted fierce anchorites in the desert, approaching St Anthony, for instance, with honeyed words, hiding their diabolical

nether parts under sumptuous dresses. Male beasts, as in 'Beauty and the Beast', or male devils, as in the 'Temptations of St Anthony', don't possess the same degree of duplicity: you can tell you're dealing with the devil on the whole. But when evil comes in female guise, you have to beware: the fairy queen may turn to dust in your arms and poisonous dust at that. This is a trope that sends thrills through stories as disparate as Wagner's *Tannhäuser,* in which the knight loses his soul to the carnal goddess of the Venusberg, and Rider Haggard's *She,* where as you might remember from the film, Ursula Andress agreed to crack open like a speeded-up earthquake to reveal that in spite of the image of loveliness she presented, she's nothing but a crumbling hag. But none of these dissembling serpents and monsters can compare with Keats's vision, in his gorgeous romance noir, 'Lamia':

> She was a gordian shape of dazzling hue
> Vermilion-spotted, golden, green, and blue;
> Striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard,
> Eyed like a peacock, and all crimson barred;
> And full of silver moons, that, as she breathed,
> Dissolved, or brighter shone, or interwreathed
> Their lustres with the gloomier tapestries . . .
> She seemed, at once, some penanced lady elf,
> Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self . . .
> Her head was a serpent, but ah, bitter-sweet!
> She had a woman's mouth with all its pearls complete . . .
> Her throat was serpent, but the words she spake
> Came, as through bubbling honey, for Love's sake . . .

But when Lamia woos Lycius she does not of course reveal her snaky shape and nature. Only at the last minute, at the

wedding feast, she's unmasked. 'And with a frightful scream she vanished'—while the poor bridegroom expires in a swoon.

The fairy seductress achieves her aims through her arts: in 'Lamia', she conjures a palace of delights straight out of *The Arabian Nights;* in the legends which inspired Keats, the temptress often lures her prey into a realm where there is no pain, no ageing, no thought of the morrow. Such fairy wives do not only make a pretence of being women; they also contradict all ideas of proper womanly conduct. Of the throng of mythical and monstrous enchantresses, one of the most famous and most fascinating of all is still Medea. Medea embodies extreme female aberration from the tragedy by Euripides in the fifth century BC to the fictional translation of her story in Toni Morrison's masterpiece, *Beloved,* published in 1987.

It is through Medea's sorcery that Jason wins the Golden Fleece: she lulls the snake its guardian with a potion obtained from Hecate, Queen of the Night. But she also uses her magic powers to cheat her father, boil an enemy in oil, cut up her brother into little pieces, and eventually, when Jason has abandoned her, to murder her two children by him. Euripides dramatised with powerful empathy Medea's tragedy: when Jason decides to take another wife more useful to his current ambitions, Medea, who after all had betrayed and killed so much on his behalf, turns on those she loves in revenge. Her maternity is the terrain of her authority—of all the authority left to her—and so she strikes at Jason where he is most vulnerable, and where his reach—and all men's—is weakest. This is the logic of her atrocity in cultural and social terms, that she perverts motherhood, because motherhood remains the principal ground of her power. Among bad mothers of fantasy she is the worst; as such she speaks to our times, when the bad mother is always present as an issue, as a

threat, as an excuse, as a pleasurable self-justification and as a political argument. Women still use, and abuse, the authority they are allowed as mothers, because it is what they have, or, as in Medea's case, what they have left.

Euripides's tragedy, written in the fifth century BC, introduced Medea the child killer, and has made this side of her much more familiar than other texts, which stress her enchantments and in some cases her humanity. We pick and choose bad mothers to suit our times just as we pick our dinosaurs. Apollonius of Rhodes, two hundred years after Euripides, in *The Voyage of Argo* does not mention Medea the murderer. In his story, her crime—for which she weeps piteously—consists only in eloping with Jason and cheating her father.

But Medea the child murderer contravenes the most fundamental criterion of femininity—maternal love. She shares this with many fantasies of female evil: the inquisition condemned witches for cannibal feasts on children; in Judaic myth, the succubus Lilith was believed to haunt cradles of newborn infants to carry them off, and the classical Lamia was a child stealer as well as a bloodsucker. Amulets against these harmful powers were worn in medieval Europe; satanic cults today are held to practise the same gory rites. Myths of female aberration predispose the mind to believe in these monstrous crimes; in even more sinister fashion, they offer imaginary models for action—the new witchcraft movement models its rituals on inquisitorial manuals which synthesised the most grotesque and fearful phantasmagoria.

Myths about female monstrousness have also stirred resistance—an antiphonal response of women's voices, who have sometimes claimed the wicked heroines as foremothers, sometimes disclaimed them as slanderous fictions. In 1405, the poet

and historian Christine de Pizan, one of the earliest women to support her family by writing, compiled a riposte to the circulating tittle-tattle about women in her *Book of the City of Ladies*. She set up an array of heroines, geniuses, leaders, and saints, and portrayed them building a heavenly city. Among the paragons, without turning a hair, she included Medea:

> Medea . . . was very beautiful, with a noble and upright heart and a pleasant face. In learning, however, she surpassed and exceeded all women; she knew the powers of every herb and all the potions which could be concocted . . . and she was ignorant of no art which can be known. With her spells she knew how to make the air become cloudy or dark, how to move winds from the grottoes and caverns of the earth, and how to provoke other storms in the air, as well as how to stop the flow of rivers, confect poisons, create fire to burn up effortlessly whatever object she chose and all such similar arts. It was thanks to the art of her enchantments that Jason won the Golden Fleece.

No mention of mayhem here: only a passing allusion to her ability to 'confect poisons'. Later, in a passage on the dangers of love, Pizan relates that Medea unfortunately fell in love with Jason, and listened to her passion, only to find that he abandoned her. This turned her 'despondent', writes Pizan. Again, no memory of the remarkable form Medea's despondency took.

When I first read this, nearly twenty years ago, I thought Pizan was absurdly coy, and felt that feminism could not proceed without facing women's crimes as well as their wrongs—the ills they did as well as those done to them. This is still my position—

when it comes to historical events; but with regard to myths which shape thought and action and history the question becomes much more complicated. Every telling of a myth is a part of that myth: there is no ur-version, no authentic prototype, no true account. Pizan's Medea is as mythically true as Euripides's; Pizan is important because she's one of the first women writers to tell stories against the grain of tradition. Hers might tend to whitewash; but the tradition she inaugurated tends more to accept, even revel in the darkness.

The mythical she-monster's allure spellbound Sylvia Plath, for instance. The phantom of Medea herself materialises in 'Edge', one of Plath's most troubling and potent poems, when she invokes the triple death of mother and children as if it were a female calling, meeting a need, matching a desire:

> *The woman is perfected.*
> *Her dead*
>
> *Body wears the smile of accomplishment,*
> *The illusion of a Greek necessity*
>
> *Flows in the scrolls of her toga,*
> *Her bare*
>
> *Feet seem to be saying:*
> *We have come so far, it is over.*
>
> *Each dead child coiled, a white serpent . . .*

Here Plath peels away the horror which greets the sight, to uncover the voluptuous shiver it inspires: her necrophiliac vision satisfies the worst imaginings of women's malignancy and offers at the same time an image of fitting self-punishment. Plath herself

didn't make a recording of 'Edge', but in 1963, she read on the radio her 'Lady Lazarus'. In this poem, she moves through despairing, holocaust imagery to grasp its morbid power with hard and angry pleasure.

I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash—
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

Plath defies her audience to deny her her transgressive appetites: nocturnal, man-eating, child-killer, she turns to fantasy and projections to increase her own powers of verbal enchantment.

Many other writers and artists and performers today have also moved onto enemy territory where Medea and other monsters are pacing: Toni Morrison, in her novel *Beloved,* dramatised an incident in her native Ohio that had taken place in the turmoil of the aftermath of the Civil War, when a slave had killed her young daughter rather than let her be taken back into slavery in

the household of a brutal master. Morrison's imagination becomes itself possessed by the spirit of Sethe, the mother, and of Beloved, the child who haunts her. She brings the terrible act of infanticide so powerfully before the reader that all stock reactions burn up in the passionate intensity of her sympathy. The novel itself works like sorcery—through incantation, and conjuring of ghosts. Morrison's Medea isn't Pizan's courtly wisewoman, or Plath's demonic mistress, but distils the pure torment of a woman in the grip of a vicious history. The dedication of *Beloved,* to 'Sixty Million and more' makes explicit the work's character as a cenotaph, to the African transports in the slave trade, many of them nameless, obliterated.

Many other contemporary artists, performers, as well as writers have also seized myths of female danger. Moving in to occupy the metaphorical objects of derision and fear has become a popular strategy. Sometimes this takes the form of ironically co-opting a jibe, or even an insult—as in the open defiance of the black rock group called Niggers with Attitude, or the ironic names of women's enterprises, like the famous publishers, Virago. In Zagreb, five writers were recently denounced as dangerous women in the Croatian nationalist press: the targets immediately accepted the label, and their supporters now wear badges proclaiming them 'Opasna Žena'—a dangerous woman. This is a form of well-proven magic, uttering a curse in order to undo or claim its power, pronouncing a name in order to command its field of meaning. Former misogynist commonplaces are now being seized by women; in rock music, in films, in fiction, even in pornography, women are grasping the she-beast of demonology for themselves. The bad girl is the heroine of our times, and transgression a staple entertainment: Madonna flexing her crotch with her hand, singing 'Papa don't preach.'

But this defiance sometimes results, it seems to me, in collusion, it can magnify female demons, rather than lay them to rest, for men and for women. The limits of the carnivalesque, of turning the world upside down as a rebel strategy, have long been recognised: make the slave king for a day and he'll be docile for a year. Attaching different values to *idées fixes* about unruly women proves an ineffectual line of resistance to material problems. Madonna, as she showed in her book, *Sex,* extols her own power in wilful and mindless blindness to most women's continuing vulnerability in sexual matters: in her case, degradation is a fantasy, and she's in a unique position to choose to find it sweet. It's interesting that some of her most adoring women fans, who have recently published their dreams about her, avoid—even in their unconscious, it seems—the side of her that likes boasting about sadism, and evoke her as a kind of best friend, a gal pal, a cross between a girl guide and a fairy godmother. Their evasion admits that Madonna plugs into men's fear and loathing when she flaunts the insatiable pussy.

The mythology of ungovernable female appetite can't be made to work for women; ironies, subversion, inversion, pastiche, masquerade, appropriation—these postmodern strategies all buckle in the last resort under the weight of culpability the myth has entrenched. It permeates the furious response, for instance, to the increasing numbers of single mothers. Instead of inquiring into the causes of marriage breakdown, into the background to so many fatherless families, into the reasons women have become heads of households, instead of attending to the needs of women who are raising children on their own, instead of acknowledging the responsibility most of them are showing towards the task of mothering, and recognising the way the work of care still stitches together the torn fabric of society, lone mothers have come under

prolonged and continuing attack. Newspapers, television programs, the conservative cabinet, let fly with one accusation after another; one scare story after another: Home alone children of single, working mothers, home alone children of lesbian couples, opportunistic teenage deviants, and welfare swindlers or at least leeches, spawning child murderers, breeding monsters.

Young criminals—themselves demonised—flourish at the hands of the lone mother, especially, we are told, if she isn't a widow, or an abandoned woman, but unmarried. And the authorities respond: a prison sentence is handed down for a woman who left her child at home when she went to work—as if sending the mother to jail would give the child the help she needed. The recent budget allowing the vital principle that a mother cannot work without some arrangement of child care was at last a step in the right direction.

But the same policy makers who deregulate, who throw employment and housing onto the mercy of market forces, want to regulate the family. It would be better if they stopped their law-and-order ranting and looked clearly at the social revolution that is taking place: in the UK alone, sixty-five per cent of single parents were once married to the fathers of the children. But they are now coping on their own, in almost one in five families in this country; three out of four of these heads of households are women. Like the heir to the throne, more than one in six of his future subjects are being raised by their mothers on their own: they are however rather less well off, as these families are amongst the poorest in the country. One of the reasons the public isn't specially afraid that Prince William will turn out a hooligan but will most likely thrive has more to do with the comforts he enjoys than the state of his parents' marriage.

Women are for the most part doing the best they can in the

circumstances—and learning to survive as they go. Sometimes this entails choosing to keep the family away from the father. Very few of the families have actively sought the circumstances in which they find themselves; in some cases, when the women claim with pride they have indeed chosen, it is worth recalling, without condescension, that if the man in question could or did behave differently, they might think otherwise. And the new self-esteem they can assert is extremely valuable, indeed vital, to their children's own sense of worth. This is the one aspect of feminism that has brushed some of these mothers.

What no thundering moralist has yet seen is that among the young, unmarried mothers whom they are most angry about many have actually gone 'back to basics': they're fulfilling the most ingrained conservative view of woman's function. They are carrying on the make-believe games encouraged by girls' toys—one of the current selling lines is a set of quintuplets, five babies equipped with five sets of nappies, five strollers, five cradles, and so forth. Having and looking after children gives women a recognised part to play; they have this social function—and they have it over men.

Yet the bitter, angry, ignorant view persists, that we inhabit an imaginary cosmos where women on top are somehow killing men and usurping Daddy's throne, where Madonna gyrates and strips to proclaim she's in control, that women are spearheading some feminist revolution, having it all their own way because they've been allowed to slip all traditional moral restraints.

I'm not saying that exploitations and abuses don't happen. Nor am I denying that some women are having babies on their own on purpose. Nor am I ignoring the difference between young women's sense of a role, and many young men's sense of being

adrift, with no mooring in sight. But chronic scare-mongering about female behaviour—about wild sexuality and aberrant maternity—distorts understanding and sinks matters of urgent social policy—the proper provision of child care, tax reform, job training and retraining, nursery schools, housing, play areas—into a quagmire of prejudice.

A myth is a kind of story told in public, which people tell one another; they wear an air of ancient wisdom, but that is part of their seductive charm. Not all antiques are better than a modern design—especially if they're needed in ordinary, daily use. But myth's own secret cunning means that it pretends to present the matter as it is and always must be, at its heart lies the principle, in the famous formula of Roland Barthes, that history is turned into nature. But, contrary to this understanding, myths aren't writ in stone, they're not fixed, but often, telling the story of the same figures—of Medea or of dinosaurs—change dramatically both in content and meaning. Myths offer a lens which can be used to see human identity in its social and cultural context—they can lock us up in stock reactions, bigotry and fear, but they're not immutable, and by unpicking them, the stories can lead to others. Myths convey values and expectations which are always evolving, in the process of being formed, but—and this is fortunate—never set so hard they cannot be changed again, and newly told stories can be more helpful than repeating old ones. Both Freud and Jung adapted the long classical tradition of allegorical interpretations, reading the mythical corpus of narratives, learned and popular, in order to unlock symbolic, psychic explanations of human consciousness and behaviour. The paradoxical rationality of myth, the potential of figments to disclose the truth about ourselves, has become the fruitful premise of much

contemporary thinking about the mind and personality; the enlightenment distinction between logic and fantasy has given way in the growing realisation that the structures of the imagination, often highly ordered and internally consistent, themselves form understanding. Pleas for a return to reason, for simply stripping away illusion, ignore the necessity and the vitality of mythical material in consciousness as well as unconsciousness.

There's a beauty and the beast story that I'd like to tell you, because like many fairy tales, it shows that things are never quite as they seem and that surprises can spring from any quarter. 'The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell' is a verse romance written in the mid-fifteenth century by a forgotten and nameless English poet. It reworks the familiar fairy-tale theme of a young man's union with a she-monster, and by the way produces a happy story, at first bawdy, later tender, about the possibility of mutual love and trust, against the odds.

King Arthur, out hunting one day, falls foul of a terrible warlock, who agrees to spare him only on condition that he discovers, within a year, the answer to that fundamental question: What do women want? If King Arthur cannot give the right answer, his head is forfeit. When his time of grace is almost up, Arthur comes across a terrible hag, a lady so foul the poet lets rip with a full-blown comic lexicon of loathliness. She knows the true answer, and she'll pass it on to Arthur, but only if he gives her Sir Gawain for a husband. This is a bitter blow; however, when Arthur tells Gawain, Gawain, that pattern of chivalry, wants nothing better than to serve his liege lord, and agrees to the match. The loathly lady then reveals:

We desire of men above all manner of things
To have the sovereignty . . .

Of all, both high and low.
For where we have sovereignty all is ours
Though a knight be never so fierce,
And ever the mastery win . . .
Of the most manliest is our desire:
To have the sovereignty of such a sire;
Such is our craft and gin

So to the question what do women want—which would vex Freud so deeply later—the answer is sovereignty. And womanly wiles—women's craft and gins—tend to this hidden purpose. This solution, spoken to a classical or a Christian audience, where the subordination of women was considered nature ordained by divine commandment, automatically conjures the sexual and political nightmare of rule by women—velociraptors doing just as they please.

But the tale of the loathly lady subsequently takes a surprising turn against the grain of its own misogyny. For after Arthur's correct answer redeems him from the warlock's clutches, Gawain does indeed marry the foul hag, Dame Ragnell, with her boar's tusk teeth and hanging paps, and in bed on the wedding night, gallantly consents to kiss her. Whereupon, he finds he holds in his arms: 'the fairest creature/That ever he saw . . .'

She tells him she's bound by a spell, and then puts an old, fey riddle to Gawain: would he have her fair by night and foul by day, or vice versa? It is to this conundrum that the perfect knight answers: 'Do as ye list now, my lady gay'.

By allowing her sovereignty at that moment, Gawain performs the final magic which undoes the spell, and his loathly lady's transformed, becoming fair both by day and night. And they live together in great happiness—but for only five years, for then,

the poet tells us in a line which pulls the romance oddly into history, she tragically dies young.

The story, based on the same material Chaucer used for the Wife of Bath in *The Canterbury Tales,* can be read at one level as yet another medieval joke about wilful wives, henpecked husbands, as a hostile parable about women on top—or it can be taken to point towards a utopian destination—of negotiated exchanges, of generosity and trust. Sovereignty here can of course be interpreted as domination, and the legend as a burlesque commentary on women's lusts—for sex and mastery—a cautionary tale about the secret will to power of all women which men must recognise and control. But the story's sudden swerve out of comedy into romance, out of bawdy into lyricism, promises high rewards for mutual respect, and extols Gawain for his courtesy towards the loathsome, despised old hag. Sovereignty over self—not over others; the right to govern one's own person, not the right to govern others. The loathly lady gives him love, Gawain brings about her restored shape, her emancipation through his growing understanding.

As a footnote to this look at the serpentine metamorphoses of the monstrous female, I'd like to direct your notice to some scientific data about the praying mantis:

> Eckehard Liske and W. Jackson Davis of Santa Cruz, California . . . videotaped the mantises' courtship while the insects thought they were in private and found a pleasant ritual dance in place of cannibalism—and with both partners surviving. The researchers say that until now scientists have distracted the insects by their presence and by watching them under bright lights—and that they didn't give them enough to eat.

This most loved creature in the surrealist bestiary of misogynist folklore, this insect famous for devouring her mate alive after mating, has been vindicated. Let them alone, give them enough to eat and look! they fall into peaceful mutual post-coital slumber.