Finch, Burney, Barbauld and the Brontes: feminine identity

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Finch, Burney, Barbauld and the Brontes: feminine identity

by

Lori Ann Davis

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of MASTER OF ARTS

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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1992
Dec. 2, 1992

Memorandum

To: Graduate College  
From: Signature redacted for privacy, Assoc. Prof., English  
Re: Completion of conditions for Lori Davis’s graduation  
(SSN 371-86-9943)

At Lori Davis’s oral examination for her Master of Arts degree November 19, the POS Committee voted that Lori should be approved for graduation pending completion of several additional tasks in her written thesis. The tasks were to revise both the introduction and conclusion of the thesis and to prepare a bibliography of works cited. She has now satisfactorily completed these tasks and should be given an OK slip for graduation to bring to her current teachers. Please call me at once if there is anything further I must do to clear her for graduation. Thank you.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Modern readers of literature have occasionally noticed similarities in the themes and imagery of British women writers. These similarities have been argued as springing from either a shared cultural heritage or a gender-specific biological experience.

Proponents of the 'nurture' camp suggest that common life experiences within western culture, including a shared literary history, political invisibility, and domestic responsibilities which set definite limits on intellectual pursuits worked to create in these women a shared consciousness, intimately connected to their personal identities, which encodes a distinctly feminine imprint on much of their work. Proponents of the 'nature' camp, on the other hand, suggest that not cultural experience, per se, but the biological differences between men and women are largely responsible for the similarities in women's writing.

These two hypotheses often overlap. For instance, does a woman's interest in and treatment of childbirth spring from a biological response to the subject, or the actual experiences of childbirth that women have shared throughout history. The issue will probably never be completely
resolved, as neither biology nor culture can be stripped away from the human experiences of any woman writer.

We can, however, examine the common threads which bind the motifs of women's writing and seek illumination from whatever 'nature' or 'nurture' evidence we discover. It is this exploratory and ambiguous type of illumination which I will attempt to provide in the following pages, by carefully examining one the most common themes among eighteenth and nineteenth century women writers, the issue of feminine identity - what it is, how they find it, and the obstacles which appear to stand in their path. For the purposes of this study, I will not attempt to define feminine identity as either biologically or culturally based. Instead, I will loosely define it as that inner impulse which contrasts to traditionally masculine epistemologies, and is notable for intellectual introspection, a recognition of subjective experience as a fundamental quality of wisdom, a yearning for nature which parallels ancient communities and their religious beliefs about a feminized nature, and a pervasive sense of being held at bay or in imminent danger of psychic oppression by the masculinized culture in which these women live, a culture which denies them the strength of mind, heart and imagination they know they possess. Whether these women are discovering some primordial feminine identity within themselves, or are looking to create something new,
the process of working out such conflicts within themselves produced similar thematic treatments in their literary work.

For Anne Finch, Frances Burney, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, and Charlotte and Emily Bronte are all, to some extent, engaged in resolving this issue. At the root of the problem for all of them is the conflict between personal and social definitions of feminine identity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They all struggle to come to terms with social structures and expectations which seem at odds with their inner psychic impulses. And in their attempts to find psychic integrity and cohesion they discover that the 'feminine' traits prescribed by society reflect but a small proportion of their human potential and they find themselves seeking a means to accept and express those vital parts of themselves which cannot be contained within the social roles available to them.

Significantly, all the writers draw upon the imagery of ancient cultic mythologies, particularly the goddess imagery of a supposedly forgotten age. These ancient images consistently capture the imagination of women writers. Among the common motifs is the feminine personification of Nature, an ancient motif with nearly unlimited implications for western culture. The goddess and nature motifs, intertwined, assume the 'natural' world as the woman's domain, a spiritual haven and source of personal inspiration.
which is not only closed to the men around them, but even pitted directly against the traditionally 'masculinized' world of western civilization.

This retreat from a masculine world to a feminine world is both external and internal. At times, oppressive social structures appear to be smothering the feminine soul, but just as often, the masculine elements within the female psyche appear to be at war with equally innate feminine elements, threatening the psychic integrity of the human soul. It is here that we see shadows of a much older concept of femininity connected with nature in its ancient understanding of incorporating all aspects of life, not simply one portion of human nature. It is this desire to capture the entire humanness within themselves, without excising the masculine elements and fragmenting their identities, which drives the work of these authors. Indeed, in many instances their characters possess this psychic integrity, but face a supreme challenge within their society to protect it, express it, and generally be allowed to keep it, as the only alternative to self-destruction.
CHAPTER 2: THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND ANNE FINCH

The writers treated here did not appear on the literary scene ignorant of western literary traditions. In the attempt to resolve identity problems, they employed literary conventions which would have been recognizable to any in their audience. One of these conventions was to be termed Romantic by Wordsworth's generation, though it was hardly a new literary genre, as demonstrated by Anne Finch a hundred years earlier.

Indeed, the Romantic style was not only a relatively familiar convention by the eighteenth century, but was also, due to its development of nature as a central theme, intimately linked to a rediscovery of what might be called a feminine principle strikingly reminiscent of the goddess mythologies of the ancient world. Romantic literature has always seemed unable, in fact, to ignore the imagery associated with these old mythologies, and has inevitably embraced the inspirational female goddesses of myth and legend as significant forces of illumination. At its most fundamental level Romantic literature, whether appropriated by male or female writers, holds a special place for the feminine elements of the human spirit.
By the eighteenth century, a dichotomy had been set up which pitted Romanticism against Rationalism, and for a season Rationalism became the spiritualism of the age. Gone were the intuitive beauties of the heart. Instead, the reasoning abilities of the head were deemed unquestionably superior.

Many women hailed Reason as the equivalent of an emancipation proclamation, seeing in it a means to gain intellectual and even physical freedoms they could not traditionally claim. But rationalism by its very nature required women to seek intellectual equality with men upon men's terms, since 'feminine' qualities were dismissed as irrational and unduly emotional. Thus, we see over and over again, writers both male and female subjecting women to a litmus test in which some trait or other of femininity is supposed to be excised.

The court wits of Restoration comedy, while eager to assault the unsound logic of the Puritans (those vulgar masses of religious fanatics) by laughing at their oppression of women, 'liberated' their women characters by portraying them as nothing more than sexual creatures available for conquest. This was hardly an indication of respect for the individuality and diversity of English women. Likewise, writers such as Swift, though prepared to grant intellectual equality to women if such potential could
be tapped, demanded that intellectual achievements be measured against male standards, thereby stripping women of their rights to femininity. In fact, Swift himself seemed acutely uncomfortable with female sexuality, and preferred to either ridicule or ignore it altogether. Likewise, women authors such as Mary Astell, while promoting the intellectual liberation of women, did not hesitate to decry the sexuality of women as something better suppressed.

In short, many women found themselves frustrated in this search for intellectual self-discovery and fulfillment. Traditional feminine epistemologies were under constant attack, while traditional masculine epistemologies often proved uncomfortable and unrewarding to women. The conflict this created in some talented women is perhaps best displayed in the poetry of Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea.

Despite the ferment of rationalism, actual expectations and assumptions about women were surprisingly unchanged at the end of the seventeenth century. Favorite biases, entrenched for centuries, remained steadfastly anchored in custom and social mores. Though the idea of the woman scholar had evolved enough that Mary Astell could function as an independent respectable woman thinker without the sexual stigmas of an earlier day, the literary patriarchy was still powerful enough to cause serious concern to many
literary women. Indeed, it loomed like an ominous shadow over many writers. Anne Finch, one of the most interesting poets of the time, found a unique voice in attempting to deal with the psychological inhibitions and limitations she faced as a writer.

In my view, Anne Finch displays a fascinating vacillation between two distinct poetic voices. The first voice, the Augustan voice, is most clearly heard through the figure of Ardelia, a persona adopted by Anne Finch in several of her poems. This is the voice of the 'prophet' poet who stands apart from the world in order to judge and analyze it, particularly from a morally or socially self-conscious point of view. The second voice is a retreat from this world entirely, to a private realm which often resembles a mythic place almost totally feminized. Finch substantiates through this voice not only the feminine mythologies of a far-distant past, but also her own spiritual frustrations as a feminine figure in a masculine poetic world.

The first voice seems to have been born out of a need to be taken seriously as a poet in a society which rarely afforded equal respect to the poetic efforts of women. While men of similar talents might have been truly accepted as moral prophets, women were often dismissed by critics as perhaps interesting, but ultimately unimportant literary forces. To attempt to be taken more seriously was more
likely to elicit laughter and ridicule than an adoring public, which Anne Finch clearly recognized. After all, the presumptuousness of a woman writing poetry was itself enough to call such a woman's respectability into question.

Anne Finch deals with this problem by creating a world in which the woman poet's voice carries a new and special authority. Within this carefully constructed world, the persona of Ardelia is not the voice of a mere woman, and not the 'personal' voice of the author, but a female voice liberated from the confines of the 'woman's sphere,' to use a common phrase of the next century. Released from 'womanhood,' this persona exemplifies a universal voice which can embrace subjects and ideas traditionally reserved for men. Within this context, the woman's voice can actually become the poet's voice, in the same way that male poets had traditionally used the authority of the patriarchal voice to lend poetic and prophetic authority to their own works.

In addition, with the adoption of a deliberate persona, the usual practice of judging women's poetry to be a direct expression of personal experience, and hence open to personal criticism and attacks, becomes more difficult, if not impossible. The Ardelia persona in effect removes Anne Finch from the center of her poetry to a distant, almost invisible position outside of it, in the same way that
Ardelia herself seems to exist not in the midst of society but on the fringes, where her insight and views of it carry more substantial weight as a 'seer.' Writing beyond the reach of her male critics, Anne Finch can be taken seriously in the role of Ardelia in a way the Countess of Winchilsea might not.

In this little world created by Finch, Ardelia can also become heir to a long poetic lineage in a way the author working within a patriarchal literary tradition can not. She can stand as the repository of western literary traditions, extending back through time to the Greeks, and can assume this mantle of poetic authority much more legitimately than the woman Anne Finch, who is writing in a world where creativity is a male heritage. To create this world of Ardelia's is, in itself, a creative act at odds with common notions of femininity. To create another self within this world is to usurp the male power entirely by defining a new feminine being equally capable of 'seeing' and judging society as any male Augustan poet. This power of judging, so closely associated with the responsibility of a poet-prophet to expose society for what it is, thereby suggesting what it should be, could never be granted without reservation to any female poet, since moral judgement, as it was understood, resided with the male poet prophet entirely.
Nevertheless, Anne Finch assumes the position of intellectual superiority as consciously as Pope or Dryden. For example, Ardelia can claim the serious attention of the Muses, as in "To Mr. F-, Now Earl of W-" (Finch, 82), in which she only half-jokingly assumes the role of the favorite of the Muses. She relates the astonishment of the Muses that they should be called in such haste to assist in earning "a husband's praise" (Finch, 83.35). Not only is it amazing for the poet Ardelia to care for the opinion of a husband at all, it is also amazing that such attention from the Muses should have no higher audience targeted.

In another poem, "Ardelia's Answer to Ephelia" (Finch, 85) she criticizes the silliness and shallowness of the nobility from the perspective of an unaffected and unsympathetic observer. Ardelia is not impressed by the delights of London. She is unmerciful in exposing the vanities of her friends, such as Almeria, who:

... light as her feathered dress,
Flies round the coach, and does each cushion press,
Through every glass her several graces shows,
This, does her face, and that, her shape expose,
To envying beauties and admiring beaux. (45-49)

Ardelia shocks her friends by respecting God, wearing modest clothes, and showing intelligence and judgement when
surrounded by fops. Anticipating the criticism which might be levelled at her, Ardelia herself describes why a poetess might become "a common jest":

"Then sure sh' has publicly the skill professed," I soon reply, "or makes that gift her pride, And all the word, but scribblers, does deride; Sets out lampoons, where only spite is seen, Not filled with female wit, but female spleen. Her flourished name does o'er a song expose, Which through all ranks, down to the carman, goes. Or poetry in only her picture found, In which she sits, with painted laurel crowned. If no such flies, no vanity defile The Heliconian balm, the sacred oil, Why should we from that pleasing art be tied, Or like State prisoners, pen and ink denied?"

(197-209)

Clearly, it was imperative for Finch to tread the narrow line between righteous outrage and petty "female spleen." Through Ardelia, she allows herself to slip free from the artificial limits imposed on female writers. For instance, the subject of friendship assumes a more universal importance through Ardelia. She does not write of the
friendship of women, which would have been smiled upon as something less lasting and less noble than the "great" friendships of men. Instead, in "Friendship Between Ephelia and Ardelia" (Finch, 92), friendship becomes something more solemn than sweet phrases. Through the authority of her speaker, the poet-prophet-sage, Finch can assert that her own heart is capable of containing all the most noble feelings of friendship which exist in the world. This is the friendship, not of women, but of humanity, and reaffirms the universality of Ardelia's vision and authority. Anne Finch, writing as a woman poet only, might not have been granted the same credibility.

At the same time, Finch expresses numerous reservations about her own poetic authority as well as those elements of herself which she must put aside to play that role among other, male, poets. In contrast to the Augustan persona of Ardelia, who judges the world with masculine authority and who demands the respect of male peers, Anne Finch has another voice, which is entirely feminine.

It is this voice which whispers the frustrations and doubts of a woman writer who has internalized the very restrictions upon herself which she constantly questions in her poetry. This is the woman who finds herself torn between the harsh realities of the male-dominated world in which she writes and her own feminine psyche which can find
no place to exist in that world. It is in this voice that Anne Finch expresses the pathos of the oppressed spirit, the secret hunger for spiritual freedom not available to a woman who would remain part of the world she knew - the world of social acceptance, literary achievement, and intellectual companionship. This is the voice of the feminine which cannot be excised - only repressed and silenced. To Anne Finch, the heartache of suppression finds expression in some of her most eloquent and intimate poetry.

In "The Introduction" (Finch, 78), which was deleted prior to the publishing of her first book of poems, we see the internal struggle which tormented her as a poet. Her famous lines,

Alas! a woman that attempts the pen,
Such an intruder on the rights of men,
Such a presumptuous creature is esteemed,
The fault can by no virtue be redeemed...

have earned reknown among women writers who experienced similar frustrations, and have functioned as a rallying cry against the literary patriarchy as described by Gilbert and Gubar. (Gilbert and Gubar, 3)

In the poem itself, Finch voices the purest essence of contemporary ideology. Women who wish to write are thought
to be imperilling their sexuality by so perverse and 'masculine' a desire. Instead, they are encouraged to burden their minds with nothing more taxing than "good breeding, fashion, dancing, dressing, play" and other "accomplishments" which are essentially useless as intellectual pursuits. This ideology appears even to be divinely sanctioned, and women are tasked not to endanger their looks by studying. After all, Finch sarcastically reflects, the sexual "conquests of our prime" must remain women's first consideration, as

\[\ldots\text{ the dull manage of a servile house} \]
\[\text{Is held by some, our utmost art, and use. (17-20)} \]

Though Finch has internalized these ideologies to a great extent, she cannot completely accept them and discontinue her writing. For she cannot believe that hers is a perverse spirit, nor that she should be considered a freak for yielding to her natural impulses as a writer. Like many women before her, she reaches into the past in a desperate attempt to find others like herself whose existence might justify her ambition. "Sure 'twas not ever thus," she declares (21), looking for examples. And like so many others, while she can find some biblical examples of
extraordinary women, she cannot find the great feminine principle exhibited in history as an intellectual and psychic precedent to support her "presumption." Any evidence of such a past has receded to the intellectual subconscious of her culture.

She therefore creates her own, slightly elaborated, version of history. She assumes the presence of women at biblical events such as the return of the Ark into Jerusalem. If the scriptures do not specifically record women as being present, it cannot be because they were absent or even that they lacked important influence in society. Indeed, Finch suggests that it was female voices raised in praise of David, who "Proclaim the wonder of his early war" (37), which first excited Saul's jealousy. More specifically, Hebrew women possessed the spiritual insight to recognize David's blessedness, prompting Saul's anger. Saul sees that:

Half of the kingdom is already gone;
The fairest half, whose influence guides the rest,
Have David's empire o'er their hearts confessed.

(42-44)

This is the fantasy of how the world should be - the insight of women respected as a source of spiritual leadership and
wisdom. This is the world where "A woman [Deborah] here leads fainting Israel on" (45), and where this woman can be exalted as not only "devout" and "majestic," but also exceeding her military prowess by her wisdom. The "rescued nation" can submit with dignity to "her laws" of peace and justice.

By contrast, the contemporary world in which Finch lives appears to defy the laws of nature through its oppression of women. She laments, "How are we fallen, fallen by mistaken rules?" (51) Through intellectual neglect and lost opportunity for "improvements of the mind" (53), women seem both "designed" and "expected" to be "dull." This is the tragic fall of women from a position of leadership and spiritual power to the nearly inhuman existence of household drudges. And in this world where inferiority is 'divinely ordained,' resistance and rebellion cannot be tolerated:

And if someone should soar above the rest,
With warmer fancy and ambition pressed,
So strong, th' opposing faction still appears,
The hopes to thrive can ne'er outweigh the fears
(55-58)

In spite of her lack of access to historical evidence, Finch somehow rewove, through her half-recognition of the
feminine subculture of her own day, a forgotten history in which the feminine principle was revered and elevated. For even while seeming to concede the battle on earth, hoping for a heavenly victory in exchange, she instinctively enlists the potent iconography of the bird, imagery of the ancient goddess, in her portrayal of the feminine elements within her own spirit. She writes:

Be cautioned then, my Muse, and still retired;
Nor be despised, aiming to be admired;
Conscious of wants, still with contracted wing,
To some few friends, and to thy sorrows sing;
For groves of laurel thou wert never meant;
Be dark enough thy shades, and be thou there content. (59-64)

Her invocation of her Muse as a bird hiding in a dark grove strikes a respondent chord, as it is her feminine self, so long associated with the iconography of the goddess as a bird, which is forced into the shadows by the "fears" of masculine ridicule. Her soul has taken the image of a bird, not the soaring or liberated bird her contemporaries might have associated with the noble human spirit, but hidden and secretive bird which more accurately reflects her own feminine intellectual experience.
The imagery of a bird is invoked repeatedly throughout Finch's poetry. Though her own name may have suggested some aspect of this characterization, it is unlikely that this image did not have much deeper psychic roots. In "The Bird and the Arras" (Finch, 93), she eloquently pleads the case for a spirit contained in a too small frame, trapped as a bird in a small room, within the patriarchal confines of her society.

In this poem, a bird enters a room in which an arras hangs to find shade and discovers itself trapped. The bird repeats its vain efforts to escape, though it means dashing itself against first the ceiling and then the glass window-panes. Indeed, the "imprisoned wretch" has no resources to free itself, and is left "Fluttering in endless circles of dismay" until "some kind hand" (18-19) opens a casement for it. On one level, the poem expresses the need for the human soul to spring beyond the limitations of the physical body. But on another level, Finch seems to have captured the distress felt by women who are unnaturally confined within socially-constructed 'arrases.' Unfortunately, the institutions and patriarchal traditions that suffocate women cannot be toppled by them, any more than a bird can beat its way free. Instead, the hands that built the edifices must themselves provide an escape route.
Finch's association of freedom with nature can be found elsewhere in her poetry, as the hunger for spiritual freedom seems to pervade her work. But unlike the masculinized notions of freedom expressed by Ardelia, who finds freedom by setting herself outside the narrow prejudices of her age, the feminized 'other' voice searches for freedom in isolation from humanity in general. She finds freedom, as well as spiritual serenity, in nature. In this, also, Finch reflects an almost instinctive feminine response, the response of a spirit who goes "home" to the forest in the evening, as if to a familiar and welcoming realm of nature unknown by others.

"A Nocturnal Reverie" (Finch, 105) reads almost as a manuscript of the feminine principle inherited from thousands of generations. In this poem, the poet, the 'other' voice, turns her back on the civilized world entirely, and retreats into the "Night," the place where true wisdom and spirituality can be discovered. The imagery is purely Romantic, nearly one hundred years before Wordsworth. And the Romantic principles of subjectivity, emotional receptivity, and inspiration - in short, the Romantic ideal of rebellion against cold reason and scientific method - exemplify the reclaiming of the feminine 'other.' In fact, this world comes into its own only at night, when "tyrant man does sleep" (38). The world of
Nature and the world of Woman are the same, as both are liberated by the absence of men, who cannot keep still long enough to hear the whispers of the soul. Now, the "free soul" can commune with Nature and learn its secrets. It is only in this free and feminine state that

... silent musings urge the mind to seek
Something, too high for syllables to speak;
Till the free soul to a composedness charmed,
Finding the elements of rage disarmed,
O'er all below a solemn quiet grown,
Joys in th' inferior world, and thinks it like her own (41-46)

Feminine wisdom has no place in the daylight, which is ruled by men, but must be allowed to whisper out of the night into a quiet and receptive ear.

Thus, Anne Finch herself seems, like the old goddesses, to be dual-natured. The socially 'masculine' elements of her nature - her ambition, her moral judgement, her sardonic intellect - are softened and disguised in order to maintain her reputation against scandal. On the other hand, the most feminine elements of her nature - her Romantic respect and observation of nature, her intuitive hunger for feminine insight - these could find no place among Augustan poets.
Ironically, these competing elements within her psyche are not completely oppositional, but manifestations of what earlier cultures might have labelled the all-encompassing nature of the goddess, the concept of the universal feminine soul not associated with intellectual or spiritual limitations, but with the potential of all things.
CHAPTER 3: ROMANCE NOVELS AND FRANCES BURNEY

The growing self-awareness of writers like Anne Finch mirrored the increasing frustration of women in the eighteenth-century. Watching the men around them grow rich and powerful, English women could not but notice their own lack of opportunity for personal growth. It was in many ways the emergence of the novel as a literary genre, and the romance novel as a specifically feminine form, which offered them the emotional and intellectual outlets they so eagerly sought.

The simple fact that novels tended to explore personal aspects of human relationships contributed to the increasing femininization of the genre, as the world of courtship, matrimony, family drama and internal conflict was traditionally relegated to the realm of feminine interests. Once considered too inconsequential for serious literature, the domestic scene soon became a fascinating (and profitable) topic to explore.

On one level, this new development in literature catered to the titillation factors in human relationships. The close association of novels with immorality and even pornography was not accidental. Explicit sexuality, often considered oppositional to purely intellectual literature,
found a natural place in the new forms. What had often been left unexplored for fear of 'lowering' the tone of serious writing, was now eagerly enlisted to lure the curious, and often shocked, reader.

On another level, which in many ways also explored new regions of human sexuality, novels became an important vehicle for women's attempts to forge their own identities, and to fulfill their personal quests for self-growth and self-discovery. The feminine imagination was loosed to create a feminine self, often subverting the very conventions of femininity.

The status of individual identity in fiction was an important issue throughout the century, and the subject of much debate. But the matter was handled differently for male characters than for female characters. Whereas male protagonists were likely to create identities for themselves through their accomplishments, female protagonists achieved their final identity through the relationships they forged with male counterparts. And in a society in which women could find their identity only through marriage, the ultimate test of a woman's identity would necessarily be grounded in courtship.

Mary Anne Schofield sees the development of the courtship novel in the eighteenth century as the appropriation of the male chivalric romance by women writers who subverted the
male quest plot for the purposes of a feminine identity quest. She explains:

The heroic romance had a total male orientation. It was a tale of power and control demonstrating male prowess and strength. In these historical romances originating in France and the continent, women played no part at all; they were merely considered to be part of the spoils of the conquest, providing a necessary background only... They are defined by men... The romance narrative, then, existed as a way to define quest, a search for, predominantly, the male self, which is manipulated into a search for the female self as well. (18)

To find the self is to find fulfillment if the quest is successful. Within the patriarchal structure of English society, women's fulfillment could be found only in marriage.

Thus we see courtship itself as the defining experience for young women, the single most important experience in their discovery of their own identities. Along the way they will meet with various catastrophes and adventures, all devised to test their true worth and prove their intrinsic
value. But marriage is the ultimate goal, and looms always before them as the standard against which education, intellectual pursuits, personal interests, and moral judgment must be measured.

The problem, of course, was that marriage by its very nature required a kind of selflessness from women, as they could discover their selves only in time to relinquish their independence to another. The 'feminine' ideal of non-identity except through a husband did not necessarily reflect the 'real' femininity of these emerging identities. If a woman is really to define herself as an individual being, it is difficult to resolve the loss of her individuality at the end of a courtship novel. For the final act of the heroine must be submission to the male protagonist. This conflict between the quest for identity and the fulfillment of that quest which undermines identity could not be easily resolved, and women novelists would continue to struggle with it well into the next century.

At issue was the nature of the female psyche - whether it could be reduced to a conventional role or whether it could not be contained within the boundaries of social restrictions and expectations any more than nature itself. Did society's rules aid the expression of, or repress the development of, the identities of women? Among the novels
which attempt to embrace both these questions is Frances Burney's *Evelina*.

First published in 1778, *Evelina* was an immediate runaway hit. This story of a young woman's entrance into the fashionable world, and her quest for self-identity among the oppressive elements which threaten to overwhelm her, is ostensibly a novel of manners, a 'courtesy book' for young middle class women learning how to behave in polite, class-conscious society. But the plot is in fact centered on Evelina's quest for individuality within the constraints of a rigid social structure often manipulated against her. Evelina finds herself battling the forces of a society which insists on defining her identity as a reflection of the people around her, deliberately ignoring her individuality in the process. These social forces are powerful, dangerous, and insidious, but Evelina ultimately triumphs, in great part because of her relationship with Lord Orville, an ideal figure of gentlemanly reserve.

From the beginning of the novel to the end, Evelina is constantly besieged by self-absorbed and manipulative persons who view her only as a foil for their own egos. As a good-hearted and well-bred 'innocent,' Evelina's unstudied appraisal of these characters is brutally honest. And her dawning realization of her own vulnerability to the dangers they pose is particularly subversive, as a social
infrastructure so long accepted as 'normal' is held up to penetrating scrutiny and found wanting. Evelina views her world through the penetrating perspective of a 'natural' observer, unspoiled by the artifices of society in a manner reminiscent of Anne Finch. Though Frances Burney was herself no revolutionary, and consistently spoke with the voice of 'the establishment,' her attempt to expose the dangers of people within society necessarily leads her into questioning the foundations of a society which allows unsavory people such manipulative power. The apparent necessity of undermining society in order to allow a female character a chance to discover and maintain her own identity will become almost a trademark of women's novels through the nineteenth century and will be taken up by the Bronte's in turn.

Evelina, still unsuspecting, enters the social scene almost as a lamb led to the slaughter at her first London ball. It is here that she first realizes she is thought to be "at the disposal" of the gentlemen, and in her naive assumption that she should be treated with simple human dignity, she commits a serious social blunder. The rules of polite dancing insure that male egos are given priority over female desires since no man can be refused without the lady being forced to refrain from dancing with any one else for the remainder of the evening. Evelina is ignorant of this,
and quite naturally is offended by the presumptions of the men. She writes:

The gentlemen, as they passed and repassed, looked as if they thought we were quite at their disposal, and only waiting for the honour of their commands; and they sauntered about, in a careless indolent manner, as if with a view to keep us in suspense...; and I thought it so provoking that I determined, in my own mind, that, far from humouring such airs, I would rather not dance at all, than with any one who should seem to think me ready to accept the first partner who would condescend to take me" (28-29).

Exposing the ridiculous egos of the men, Evelina is unaware that she is assaulting the very foundation upon which polite society rests - women are at the disposal of the men, and are not granted the privilege of choice. They can play by the men's rules (the most aggressive man wins) or they can sit out the game and deny themselves the pleasure of dancing, though they presumably are at the ball for the specific purpose of dancing and functioning in the pairing narrative of which dancing is a part..
Evelina not only unwittingly defies these rules by refusing Mr. Lovel and then dancing with Lord Orville, but she laughs outright at them, infuriating Lovel by giggling in his face. And from the very beginning of her London experience, Evelina finds herself battling to preserve her reputation against an angry male ego determined to destroy it in vengeance. She is labelled a "poor, weak girl," "ignorant or mischievous," and deliberately "ill-mannered" (35). Though innocent rather than ignorant, Evelina has no means by which to defend herself from Lovel's attacks, and the injustice of his remarks is only the first of many which will haunt her struggle for identity throughout the story. Thus, almost immediately, the 'natural' feminine is set at odds against the 'artificial' masculine in a battle for social survival. And Evelina has no real means of defense at her disposal since society itself is 'masculine.'

Evelina is also presented with a unique identity problem in that she is a "nobody," with no family name to back her. Without a family name, and the patriarchal authority behind it, the persons surrounding her have no starting point by which to judge her or define her relationship to themselves. If Evelina had been a man, this would not necessarily have been a disadvantage, as it would have liberated her from her family and allowed her to forge an individual identity. She would have been more at liberty to define herself. Instead,
as a woman without the protection of a name, others see her as an object to be named and defined by themselves as it suits their purposes. She becomes more vulnerable to "impertinence," usually manifested in young men who create a persona for her and treat her accordingly. This often sexual persona is always completely in opposition to her own identity. For instance, Sir Clement Willoughby constantly tries to coerce her into the role of his lover. On occasion he even goes so far as to physically entrap her, such as in his carriage while returning from the theater. In vengeance, Mr. Lovel assigns her the persona of the licentious character of a play, despite her obvious humiliation. Lord Merton assigns her the persona of a sexual accomplice, oblivious to her shocked distaste. And Mr. Smith cannot imagine that she is not in love with him, even when she bluntly refuses even to converse with him. Again, her only real defense is to appeal to the very rules of polite society which have been used against her in the first place.

The forces of polite society are not the only dangers against which Evelina must contend. This battle for identity must be waged even within her own family. Madame Duval insists that Evelina needs a Paris education because she herself cannot recognize the well-bred poise and good manners of Evelina as anything other than backwardness.
As a vulgar commoner occupying an insecure social position, Madame Duval views Evelina as a means to solidify and even improve her own social standing. Incapable of understanding any desires which differ from her own, Madame Duval is simply unable to see Evelina as an individual with a distinct and well-developed sense of self. Instead, Duval represents a loathsome version of the impolite male society Evelina is constantly seeking to escape.

Her other relatives are equally self-absorbed. Her cousin Branghton's son quickly identifies Evelina as the most expedient and reliable means of securing Madame Duval's money. And unable to recognize anything in her person which is not reflected in his own, he easily assumes that she will be a pliable partner in his scheme. Like Madame Duval, he cannot assign any motives to Evelina's actions beyond what he himself might share. If Finch's Ardelia was amazed at the self-absorbtion of her town friends, Evelina's predicament is almost ludicrous by comparison - a satire of every level of society, beginning with the gentry and proceeding down through all those aping the manners of their social superiors.

Young Branghton's sisters reduce these supposedly selfish motives of Evelina ad absurdum, convinced that Evelina is trying to steal the affections of their beaus. They are incapable of seeing beyond their petty and ridiculous
jealousies. Far from recognizing her repugnance toward Mr. Smith, they cast her in the role of a duplicitous schemer, convinced that she must share their fascination with this revolting man. And, accosted and accused from all sides, Evelina remains essentially helpless to defend herself. Though she repeatedly rejects the efforts of her family to claim her, to the point of actually fleeing their presence on occasion, these attempts usually lead to more dangerous situations. When she flees her family in the theater, she ends up alone in a carriage with Sir Clement Willoughby. When she attempts to distance herself from her family by asking that they not speak her name near Lord Orville’s coach, her relatives presume upon her acquaintance with Orville to appropriate his coach for themselves, completely mortifying Evelina. Again and again, she finds herself struggling to free herself from identity with her own family.

Not only does she reject the family which has been thrust upon her, she actively creates her own ‘new’ family through real emotional ties. First, she retains her claim on Mr. Villars as a father and continues to await his approval for her marriage even after being recognized by Sir John as his biological offspring. It is, in fact, Villars who has taught Evelina to insist upon her own individuality and has provided the education necessary for a sense of self to
mature. This takes place before her exposure to polite society, and the inner steadfastness of her own integrity is what allows her to weather the storms about her without internalizing the false identities attached to her by others. Thus, though her biological father provides her with the name she needs as a stamp of credibility, the self which is being named grew as a result of the careful nurturing of Villars, and Evelina in turn insists upon acknowledging the continued importance of Villars as an intellectual and emotional guardian.

Second, she insists on befriending Mr. McCartney, who turns out to be her half-brother, in defiance of the opinions of her 'relatives,' who are as careless and selfish in their judgments of him as they are in their judgments of Evelina. Evelina displays a strong bond of loyalty to McCartney, even to the point of jeopardizing her own reputation with Lord Orville, because she insists on granting McCartney the dignity she feels every human being, herself included, deserves. In her relationship with McCartney we see Evelina’s own quest for a self-defined identity mirrored and idealized.

Finally, Evelina reclaims her name, not through the power of the law, but through the power of her own looks, which prove her true identity. In this she is not dependent upon any social institution, and she is not vulnerable to any
human manipulation. It is her Nature, revealed in her looks, which is allowed to speak for her more eloquently than any words. The final proof rests upon that essential part of herself which cannot be altered or repressed, but only recognized and accepted, in the same manner in which her feminine identity demands recognition and acceptance. This is the end she has been seeking from the beginning, not only with Sir John Belmont, but from everyone she encountered. At her first ball, Lord Orville alone discounts the accusations of ill-breeding by declaring "that elegant face can never be so vile a mask!" (35) And throughout the story, it is Evelina's face more than anything which reveals her essential nature in opposition to contradictory and impertinent descriptions of herself. It is to the man who can read this face, and the inner nature it symbolizes, that Evelina's real self will be revealed.

In this it becomes obvious that the ultimate power of self-definition must always be granted to women by men, and the plot of Evelina reflects not only her personal struggle for self-definition, but the need to find a man who will allow her the right to assert her own identity. She can escape her relatives at the Opera, but not without a man's assistance. And even with this assistance, she finds herself unable to join another party, ending up trapped instead with Willoughby in a more vulnerable and dangerous
situation. Without the protection and support of a "gentleman" she is essentially powerless to complete the act of self-creation.

"Gentlemen," however, are far more scarce than Evelina ever imagined. She requires a man who will allow her some distance between his expectations and her real nature. She needs someone who will refrain from judging her by her companions and by his own preconceptions, someone who can stand back and allow her inner nature to reveal itself. She needs someone who will not impose restrictions on her but recognize instead the unlimited potential of her heart. This proves more difficult than Evelina ever suspected it would be.

Throughout the story, it is only Lord Orville who always grants her the opportunity to claim her own identity. It is Orville who recognizes Willoughby's manipulations and offers alternative escape routes. It is Orville who consistently protects her from the insolence of impertinent men, who champions her right to create her own identity, and who time and again refuses to judge her by the company she keeps. Even Villars, who grants her permission to leave home, is uneasy with her independence, and tells her whom not to love.
But Orville is irresistible to Evelina because he represents the only means by which she can claim her own heart. Demonstrating sincere concern for her by allowing her the freedom to simply be, he acts in the role of Anne Finch’s unseen hand releasing the trapped bird from the arras. Representing the cultural institutions which have been used by others to entrap her for their own purposes, Orville reveals the escape mechanisms built into the same structure, and exposes his own true worth as one who would release the spirit rather than enclose it. Burney’s creation of Orville not only exposes the patriarchal establishment of eighteenth-century England as oppressive and cruelly advantageous to those who would abuse their authority, but also recaptures the ancient essence of the feminine principle as a spiritual treasure to be cherished and defended. This ‘gentleman’ respects Evelina as he respects nature – simply because it is. There is nothing in Orville to suggest the conqueror, in contrast to the vast array of male figures who seem to have no other impulses beyond sexual domination and conquest. The existence of Orville, and Evelina’s marriage to him, are the triumphs of the plot. And the final assertion of the legitimacy of her own heart is the triumph of Evelina.

The fact that such a character would have been very difficult to find in Frances Burney’s England is perhaps
less important than that he could be imagined as the ideal against which to measure others. For a new respect for the feminine principle was beginning to emerge in a movement which would soon be called Romantic.
CHAPTER 4: ROMANTICISM AND ANNA LAETITIA BARBAULD

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, a reaction against the Enlightenment tradition and the cultural monopoly of France began to gain momentum. As stated earlier, this Romantic movement traditionally associated with Wordsworth and his contemporaries was, in fact, a reaction against many decades of neglecting and even disparaging the feminine impulses in society and human experience. Romanticism was in fact the re-emergence and revaluation of impulses which had simply been dormant for a time, but not forgotten. Just as Renaissance writers had rediscovered the 'feminine' soul in the hearts of male poets and treasured it as an inspirational gift, so male poets again found something extremely inspirational in this most recent 'discovery' of the ancient feminine mythologies.

The basic premise of Romantic thinkers was that rationalization had stripped all the spirituality from life by reducing every human experience to cold reason, and subjugating natural beauty to artificial aesthetic standards. The mysteries of organic life needed to be recognized and explored, with an emphasis on the sublime over the mundane. The Romantics believed that a new
aesthetics was in order, and a new Reason, which would bring about glorious changes in all facets of society.

Romanticism incorporated many beliefs, some of which contradicted each other, but most of which seem in retrospect to be clearly linked to a rediscovery of the feminine principle as an important spiritual legacy and source of enlightenment. In general, subjective experiences were valued over objective observation. A new kind of rationalism, espoused by philosophers such as Kant, was brought forward as an alternative to empiricism, that 'masculinized' deity of the Enlightenment. Subjective experiences also became paramount again in religion, and subjective expressions in art favored passion - the wild, primitive, untamed elements of the human soul became a favorite topic for study. Not surprisingly, the most visible byproduct of Romantic passion was often poetry.

Some have claimed that Romanticism is poetry, and certainly the influence of the poetic imagination was extraordinary. The poet's mission, of course, was to become a perfect interpreter of nature and the truths contained within it. Combining poetry and nature, two of the highest ideals of any Romantic, resulted in poetry which was pastoral and rustic, pre- (and sometimes anti-) industrial, and quite prepared to find the secrets of the universe in a sheperdess's staff. Lyrical poetry discarded the witticisms
of the court, and embraced simple stanzas of innocent bliss, the subjects in harmony with nature and possessed of transcendent wisdom. The feminine mythologies of the ancient past were rediscovered and expanded as the feminine subculture of literature and art was called upon for inspiration. As Anne Finch had found spiritual and intellectual enrichment in femininized nature, and Frances Burney had reconstructed the romance quest to better suit the feminine soul, so Romantics sought comfort and insight in the shadows and margins of conventional philosophies.

In England, the poetic glorification of nature became an actual deification of nature among some Romantics. And many English Romantic artists became increasingly pagan in their religious views. Nature replaced God - God was the establishment, and Nature was as anti-Establishment to the aesthetics of the Enlightenment as the Romantics were. Emily Bronte, for instance, deeply shocked her own sister with her paganistic worldview. Indeed, Romantics worshipped nature as eagerly as any Enlightenment philosopher had worshipped Reason.

But for Romantics everywhere, imagination was supreme. The bywords were inspiration, originality, and genius. Anything new was good, anything natural was beautiful, and true art was always moral. All the old restrictions were tossed aside - in poetry, in philosophy, in theology, in
art, in music. The world will be reconstructed, and the Romantics will show us how it is to be done.

Among the generally extreme passions evoked by the Romantics, the sense of longing was paramount. This longing was most often voiced as a need to reconnect, a need to rediscover something which has been lost - some part of one's soul which seemed always beyond reach. The poets translated this longing as a desire to recreate the whole of nature in words. Always, the Romantic was striving beyond what appeared to be humanly possible, often paying a heavy price for such fervent commitment. There was an ever anguished searching for something just beyond reach, often unfocused, but overpowering enough to drive some literally insane.

An important influence on the "Romantic Movement" was Anna Laetitia Barbauld. Barbauld had a profound impact on the intellectual circles of which Wordsworth and Coleridge were a part. Her poetry reveals that, long before The Prelude, the Romantic movement was well-developed as a movement centered on God, Nature, and the Individual, a movement extremely dependent upon feminine principles and traditions. The passion, the longing, the anguished desires for more than could be had were particularly poignant in the poems she published in 1773.
Barbauld’s Poems reflected Romantic ideals of God, nature, and the individual. She was particularly adept at exploring the internal processes of the poet’s mind withdrawing from the world to seek revelation, the role of Nature in this process, and the infinite possibilities of the human imagination and the individual consciousness. In doing so, she recaptured and reasserted the authority of mythic femininity as the source of true spiritual insight. In fact, it is only through this feminine voice that the poet prophet can begin to approach an understanding of the human soul.

One of the strongest images in Barbauld’s poetry is the poet who has withdrawn from the outside world, and whose thoughts have turned inward. Blake would later write that the mind creates in its proper milieu only if it rejects the material world (Abrams p.13), and later Romantic poets often deliberately isolated themselves from society for this reason. Barbauld reflects a similar philosophy. For instance, in “The Invitation: to Miss B****” (Barbauld, 13), she urges her friend to join her by abandoning the "glittering scenes ... and illusive light" of society and heed the Muse’s call to retire "To the pure pleasures rural scenes inspire" (Barbauld, 14). However, unlike eighteenth century poets who contrasted the virtues of nature against the artificiality of society, Barbauld never directs her
attention to anything other than that which is outside the realm of public society. Unlike Pope, Dryden, and Swift, who modelled themselves as spokesmen for the highest standards of urban society, Barbauld ignores urban society altogether and searches for truth elsewhere. For her, the masculine construct of society, the empirical and material, offers no spiritual sustenance. Abrams calls this theme the "disinherited mind which cannot find a spiritual home in its native land" (Abrams, p.14), but Barbauld does not seem to see herself rooted in society. Instead, she is a 'native' of Nature, and it is from a feminine natural world that she draws her poetic strength. Thus, withdrawal from society is not a punishment (with the exception of Ovid in "Ovid to his Wife") but is eagerly self-imposed.

The reason for her retreat is to stimulate her imagination, which is stifled in the bustle of everyday concerns. By ignoring the artificiality of society and concentrating on quiet reflection, she can more deliberately shape and mold her spiritual identity, and consequently move closer as a poet to her understanding of Nature's truth. As she writes in "A Summer Evening's Meditation" (Barbauld, 131),

This dead of midnight is the noon of thought,
And wisdom mounts her zenith with the stars.
At this still hour the self-collected soul

Turns inward... (134)

Her poetry reflects the internal processes of this meditation. Imaginative visions appear to be spontaneous revelations brought about by this reflective process. There is a striking similarity to Wordsworth's description of himself as "musing in solitude" (Abrams, p.14). Just as later Romantic poets would do, she chooses her own thoughts and feelings as her subject matter, in a mental journey of self-revelation. Again, this affirmation of the authority of the self as the primary source of poetic inspiration speaks eloquently against the impersonal 'universal' voices of her masculine contemporaries, and allows her to draw upon the feminine subculture overtly rather than indirectly.

For the primary catalyst for this revelatory process is Nature. It is in Nature that the Muses have "fixt their sacred seats" (Barbauld, 78). By focusing on Nature to the exclusion of all else, the poet learns to distinguish what is "natural" from what is "artful." True revelation comes only from what is "natural," with the sometimes unspoken acknowledgment that Nature is feminine. Nature is "the nursery of men for future years" (Barbauld, 18), the place where they will learn not only knowledge but also virtue. It is by observing Nature, by studying and meditating upon
it, that the imagination is loosed and "luxury of thought" (Barbauld, 20) is cultivated. This is not just the imagination of a poet searching for an interesting subject, but the imagination of a prophet, who uses these meditative strategies to strengthen and expand her mind. In Barbauld's poems, we see a resurgence of the Renaissance fascination with the feminine nature as something within the poet's own being which it was in his interests to seek.

For Barbauld, it is spring, associated with the emergence of new life and the hope of maturity, which most clearly corresponds to the spiritual world of thought and inspiration. In "On the Backwardness of the Spring, 1771" (Barbauld, 31), Barbauld expresses impatience with the slow approach of spring, because "fancy droops" until "indulgent nature loose(s) this frozen zone" (Barbauld, 32). Similarly, in "Ode to Spring" (Barbauld, 97), spring is the source of hope, the source of new emotional and intellectual beginnings. Spring is courted by the poet as if it were indeed the Muse of inspiration, who breathes "tender calm" on storms, and is entreated to "unlock...copious stores" (Barbauld, 98) of knowledge and understanding.

Close observation of Nature is also used as a means of setting up and exploring some emotional problem or crisis which can be developed throughout the poem. For instance,
in "To Mrs. P----, with some Drawings of Birds and Insects" (Barbauld, 41), she describes in exacting detail the forms and activities of birds and insects, but in such a way as to make the familiar appear new. Shelley would later write that "Poetry...reproduces the common universe...but purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being...(and) creates anew the universe, after it has been blunted by reiterations" (Abrams, p.11). So Barbauld, by creating a little world peopled with nations of birds and insects, simultaneously reveals the parallels between the physical and the spiritual world. In this nearly metaphorical world, the royal eagle "with cruel eye premeditates the war," while he "feasts his young with blood" (Barbauld, 43). The exotic and captive silver pheasant "hangs his ruffled wing / Opprest by bondage" (Barbauld, 44) and the masses of migrating birds "by instinct led," "leave the gathering tempest far behind" (Barbauld, 45). The political realities of eighteenth century Europe are thrown into sharp relief against this "natural" setting. This subtle critique of a masculine world from a feminine vantage point is ultimately damning.

Over and over, the wonder of Nature recurs as a source of inspiration and a font of understanding. It is through Nature, and through the imagination which is released in contemplating Nature, that the poet can transcend the purely
rational. Wisdom is clearly identified as something different from early eighteenth century ideas of wit. Unlike contemporaries who associated knowledge with correctness, mental discipline, and dogmatic aesthetics, Barbauld insists on the importance of instinct, intuition, and the feelings of the heart to supplement and balance the judgements of the head. To Barbauld, human understanding evokes images of a cornucopia of emotional and intellectual delights, which the poet revels in sampling without restriction and without "unnatural" restraint. This is particularly true in "To Wisdom" (Barbauld, 57), in which Wisdom is courted as something which should be serene, but not boring. If Wisdom "comst"

To bid our sweetest passions die

And dry the springs whence hope should flow;
WISDOM, thine empire I disclaim,
Thou empty boast of pompous name! (Barbauld, 58)

Clearly, Barbauld is resisting eighteenth century discriminations between passion and intellect, discriminations which often ascribed passion to women and intellect to men. To her contemporaries, passions were not only inferior to intellect, but distractions which must be
set aside. To Barbauld, however, passions are necessary to intellectual growth. The passions are the sweetness which whet the appetite for knowledge. This is also revealed in "The Groans of the Tankard" (Barbauld, 25), when the tankard rebels against the repression of human passion:

Unblest the day, and luckless the hour
Which doom'd me to a Presbyterian's power;
Fated to serve the Puritanick race,
Whose slender meal is shorter than their grace"
(Barbauld, 28-29)

The appetite for life is to be savored and indulged, not smothered under dogma. The importance of the passions is also revealed in "To Mrs. P------, with some Drawings of Birds and Insects" (Barbauld, 41) when she writes that poetry "Can pierce the close recesses of the heart," and

Can rouse, can chill the breast, can sooth, can wound;
To life adds motion, and to beauty soul,
And breathes a spirit through the finish'd whole

The wonder of Nature can inspire these passions, laying the groundwork for true understanding. Thus, the feminine
impulses within the poet Barbauld are the foundations of wisdom, not alternatives to it.

But it is not simply the wonder of nature which overpowers Reason and allows the poet to transcend it. The wonder of God reflected in Nature has so powerful an effect upon this poet. For nature is, finally, the best and truest means by which to see God, a particularly revealing glimpse at the philosophy behind Barbauld's poetry. In "An Address to the Deity" (Barbauld, 125), Barbauld writes that "All nature faints beneath the mighty name,/ Which nature's works, thro' all their parts proclaim" (Barbauld, 126). The nature of God is reflected in the natural physical world, implying that one can read God by learning to read nature. In the same poem she writes,

I read his awful name, emblazon'd high
With golden letters on th' illumin'd sky,
Nor less the mystic characters I see
Wrought in each flower, incrib'd on every tree;

Also in "A Summer Evening's Meditation" (Barbauld, 131) she compares Nature to the secret handwriting of God:

... he, whose hand
With hieroglyphics older than the Nile,
Inscrib’d the mystic tablet; hung on high
To public gaze, and said, adore, O man!
The finger of thy GOD...

Other Romantic poets would also describe the created universe as granting direct access to God, and even as itself possessing the attributes of divinity. Again, the role of poet-prophet is important, as the interpretation of Nature becomes the interpretation of God’s will, and access to a feminine spirituality is clearly requisite. In "A Summer Evening’s Meditation" (Barbauld, 131), Barbauld describes the stars as "the living eyes of heaven" (Barbauld, 132), which, awaking for the contemplative poet, "point our path, and light us to our home" (Barbauld, 133). Just as she courts the revelation of knowledge by meditating on nature, so she courts an understanding of God by meditating on the God in nature. In "An Address to the DEITY" (Barbauld, 125), the result is that:

... every worldly thought within me dies,
And earth’s gay pageants vanish from my eyes;
Till all my sense is lost in infinite,
And one vast object fills my aching sight.
It is a daring thing to attempt to understand God Barbauld seems to swing wildly between eighteenth century notions of humankind as limited beings who should avoid extremes and recoil from "pride," and Romantic notions of humankind as creatures constantly striving for the infinite possibilities of an infinite consciousness.

Barbauld's poems often begin by reflecting a deep longing for something beyond reach, "the desire of a moth for a star," as Shelley would later say (Abrams, p.13). In "A Summer Evening's Meditation" (Barbauld, 131) the poet's

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. . . unsteady eye
Restless and dazzled wanders unconfin'd
O'er all this field of glories
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when observing the wonders of the heavens. Later in the poem she continues,

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. . . Seized in thought
On fancy's wild and roving wing I sail,
From the green borders of the peopled earth,
. . . fearless thence
I launch into the trackless deeps of space
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The total and complete abandonment of herself to her imagination takes her even beyond what she can conceive, beyond the very edge of the physical universe, as she continues,

... is there aught beyond?
What hand unseen impels me onward

To solitudes of vast unpeopled space,
The desarts of creation, wide and wild

Her longing is that of "the swelling heart,/ Abash'd, yet longing to behold her Maker."

This longing for the infinite, however, is contrasted against a need for peace and contentment. She writes in "To Wisdom" (Barbauld, 57) that she needs a balm to "soothe the sickness of the soul," to "bid the warring passions cease,/ And breathe the calm of tender peace." In her "Hymn to Content" (Barbauld, 53) she seeks contentment which is "seldom found, yet ever nigh!" Pope had written that "the bliss of mankind is not to act or think beyond mankind" (Abrams, p.12). Barbauld associates contentment with submitting to human limits. She writes enviously of others who have found this inner peace, the Phrygian Sage who "bow'd his meek submitted head/ And kis'd thy sainted feet," and of Mrs. Rowe, who was "Learn'd without pride, a woman
without art" (Barbauld, 101). Mrs. Rowe managed to tap the vast storehouse of nature without falling prey to unseemly discontent. But Barbauld cannot discover this peace within herself. In "A Summer Evening's Meditation" (Barbauld, 131), she acknowledges that her soul is unus'd to stretch her powers/ In flight so daring," and finishes with a plea to "Let me here/ Content and grateful, wait th' appointed time."

The problem is that, in stretching her imagination she discovers that God's image is mirrored not only in nature, but also in herself, and she seems startled by this discovery. When her soul turns inward, it

... beholds a stranger there
Of high descent, and more than mortal rank;
An embryo GOD; a spark of fire divine

The meditative poet, through the process of seeking God in Nature, finds the God-like in herself, and through this inner revelation, the poet-prophet becomes a truly divine voice. The Creator is re-created in the poet, who creates another universe of her own through her poetry. As Wordsworth and Coleridge would later write, the mind is "made in God's Image, and that too in the most sublimest sense - the Image of the Creator" (Abrams p.13). Thus,
Barbauld has rediscovered the feminine principle in God and Creation, ironically, a principle which would quickly be appropriated by male contemporaries as a uniquely masculine gift.

In the final analysis, Barbauld is clearly a Romantic in her understanding of God, nature, and the individual. Undoubtedly, her work must have exerted a profound influence upon the Romantic ideas of a later generation. Beyond this, however, her poetry stands as a startling testimony to one poet's imaginative vision and her ability to transcend the artificial cultural definitions of woman's nature which would have denied her this spiritual awakening.
CHAPTER 5: EMILY AND CHARLOTTE BRONTE

When Charlotte and Emily Bronte began writing in the nineteenth century they faced the still unresolved dilemma of feminine identity with which Finch, Burney and Barbauld had struggled. That was, how do women find individuality in a culture which denies them spiritual integrity? Recognizing the patriarchal structure in which they lived as inherently oppressive and inadequate to provide women the freedom to become complete individuals, Charlotte and Emily Bronte tackled the problem from two directions but employed similar strategies in reaching their conclusions.

Emily Bronte saw the destructive aspect of patriarchy as rooted in Christianity and western civilization. So she rejected these two institutions to embrace a pagan view of nature which closely resembled the goddess worship of the ancient world. In *Wuthering Heights*, published in 1847, the raw, undiluted elements of nature are reflected in the 'mythic soul,' and both seem pitted against (while at the same time dependent upon) the civilized, Christian, and somehow inadequate 'soul.'

Charlotte Bronte, on the other hand, saw the human element within Christianity which had distorted God and nature to fit a patriarchal mold as the essential source of
spiritual oppression. Accordingly, in Jane Eyre, also published in 1847, she re-writes the theology of patriarchy into a feminized theology which allows her heroine Jane to find a place in society without sacrificing her identity. Charlotte Bronte reclaims the feminine principle in God, and strengthens the feminine quest plot with the authority of God and heaven.

At the heart of both novels remains a devotion to the feminine principle as an inclusive, ever expanding and all-encompassing force, recalling long-submerged concepts of the feminine as something more than the opposition of masculine. Rather than mutually exclusive identities, feminine and masculine are treated as united at the source. As the goddess in the most ancient myths was the conduit through which the masculine principle existed, so the Brontes have demanded, through their characters, free and natural access to the masculinity which necessarily exists within their own natures. Without this psychic unity, their characters are incomplete, nonviable human beings, whether embodied as men or women. To repress this essential humanness is to destroy them, and in both novels such attempts are met with violent resistance, as the characters fight for their survival.

The Brontes' characters face the threats posed by a patriarchal world and the masculine agents within it. Expected to reject vital elements of themselves in order to
live up to standards of conventional femininity, these women find their humanity under assault. Catherine Earnshaw, the heroine of *Wuthering Heights*, is lured into accepting this role, and realizes only too late that she has destroyed herself in the process. Jane Eyre refuses to accept this mandate, and maintains a fierce rebelliousness which lends her spiritual strength when she is most tempted to allow herself to be overwhelmed.

Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff are the heart of *Wuthering Heights*. Their passions, frustrations, loves, and hates define both the problem and the solution. But it is Catherine and her fundamental psychic integrity on which the story pivots. Irene Tayler writes: "the problem of 'myself' - of what and where 'myself' is - lies at the center of Catherine's story; indeed the entire novel circles around it" (Tayler, 76).

From the beginning, Heathcliff's very existence is of questionable worth; Mr. Earnshaw puts it most succinctly to his wife: "You must e'en take it as a gift of God; though it's as dark almost as if it came from the devil" (E.Bronte, 76). In this important pronouncement, we see that Heathcliff, the dark, troubled spirit which hovers in the household, and attaches itself stubbornly to Catherine, is a representation of the dark undercurrents of the human soul. Heathcliff is, in fact, that dark spectre of Catherine's own
soul, her own other half-self, necessary to her survival but of ambivalent worth to others. This untamed, passionate element which resonates in her soul will come under deliberate attack from the civilized, Christian, educated world which sees not that Heathcliff is "a gift of God," but that he appears to be "from the devil."

For while Heathcliff is a gift, he is also a threat. While he is a fertilizing, rejuvenating element, he is also an element to be feared, for intellectually and sexually fertile women were a clear threat to nineteenth-century patriarchal men. The intellectual threat posed by Heathcliff is effectively repressed through deliberate neglect. Catherine's brother Hinton denies Heathcliff a normal education, in an effort to distance him from Catherine. This meets with mixed success, since it does make Heathcliff an unacceptable husband to Catherine, but at the same time strengthens the bond of shared neglect between them. The sexual threat Heathcliff poses is also recognized, by Linton in particular, who resents Heathcliff's intruding presence in his house, but is unable to eject him from the premises, thus revealing Linton's own impotence to Catherine. Although Heathcliff is physically and spiritually a "liberating force" (Eagleton, 15) for Catherine, he is a direct threat to the society which has
determined to reject those masculine elements in her female nature as vulgar and shocking.

Heathcliff is more than a soul-mate to Catherine. They are of the same matter, created from the same natural forces which will forever distinguish them from the ordinary, refined beings among whom they live. Their spiritual unity is mirrored in physical manifestations. Catherine herself declares to Nelly that, "whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same, and Linton’s is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire" (E. Bronte, 121). This speech is confirmed in the imagery of Lockwood’s dream and Heathcliff’s death. When Lockwood scrapes the tiny ghost hand across the broken window pane, it soaks the bedclothes with blood. Catherine bleeds because a vital part of her - her half-self Heathcliff - is still alive. Later, Heathcliff’s wrist does not bleed, meaning that he was dead before the wound was sustained. Now that they are finally united, and - finally - dead, neither of them will bleed again.

But the most convincing image of unity between Catherine and Heathcliff comes during her her famous "I am Heathcliff" (E. Bronte, 122) speech to Nelly:

'He quite deserted! we separated!' she exclaimed, with an accent of indignation. 'Who is to separate us, pray?
They'll meet the fate of Milo! Not as long as I live, Ellen — for no mortal creature... I shouldn’t be Mrs. Linton were such a price demanded' (E. Bronte, 121).

The 'fate of Milo' is crucial in revealing Catherine's relationship to Heathcliff. A renowned Greek athlete, Milo decided to demonstrate his great prowess by splitting the trunk of a living tree with his bare hands. The tree immediately closed in on his hands, and, trapped, he was eaten by wolves, prey to his own offense against nature. Catherine and Heathcliff are not doubles, or mirrors, of each other. They are in fact "sharers of one being" (Davies, 144), unable to survive if separated, and closing ranks together against anyone who would try to defile this natural unity.

But the forces of society do defile this physical and spiritual harmony. Heathcliff is represented to Catherine by her family and neighbors as someone she should be ashamed to acknowledge. Heathcliff is raw strength and power, attributes not considered proper for a young lady to possess. Accordingly, he is repressed, first by others, and then, inevitably, by Catherine herself, as she internalizes the values of the society in which she wishes to live. For it is she who, believing that she can maintain her link to Heathcliff while married to Edgar Linton, chooses to marry
Edgar. Catherine, seeing herself and Heathcliff as sharing the same identity, can not conceive of separation from him, any more than she could conceive of separating her mind from her own body. And, of course, she believes Edgar will recognize Heathcliff's importance to her and accept him as a necessary, if not particularly attractive, element of their lives together. If Catherine and Heathcliff are "male and female elements of a single being" (Tayler, 74), she cannot imagine that she is betraying Heathcliff by marrying Edgar, as that will not make her any less Catherine. However, Edgar is no Lord Orville, generously capable of allowing her this continued act of self-definition. He cannot permit Catherine to claim her own identity through this bond with Heathcliff, for in Emily Bronte's 'civilized' world, the idealized Orville does not exist.

Instead, Heathcliff is not going to be accepted by Linton, or anyone else. Heathcliff recognizes this before Catherine, and sees her proposed marriage to Edgar as a betrayal of their relationship, knowing that in the world in which they live, Catherine must choose one or the other but cannot have both. So, assuming he has been abandoned, Heathcliff in turn abandons Catherine, leaving her to marry Edgar as she pleases. The fact that a choice must always be made is crucial, as Emily Bronte harshly illuminates the realities of nineteenth-century marriage, where the cost of
love is the abandonment of a woman's own identity and the repression of half of her nature. In addition, it seems clear that to Catherine, the nature of her relationship with Heathcliff no longer includes the possibility of marriage, while Heathcliff sees it differently. He wants to be more than an "ontological abstraction" (Eagleton, 102), and begs Nelly to make him "decent" to this end. For it is not that Heathcliff does not possess the raw material to be of great worth. It is the neglect of this potential, the deliberate repression of his talents, which lowers him in the eyes of society. Nelly recognizes this, reminding him that he could as likely be a prince as a gypsy. But the environment against which he must struggle is too great, and he grows increasingly angry and violent as he watches the chasm between himself and Catherine widen, a poignant testimony to the repressed passions and desires of generations of 'decent' British women.

So the dangerously repressed Heathcliff disappears, and Catherine is left to lament the loss. When he returns three years later, he is "not literally dead, but worse - dead to her" (Tayler, 76). Catherine had told Nelly, "I cannot express it; but surely you and everybody have a notion that there is, or should be an existence of yours beyond you. What were the use of my creation if I were entirely contained here?" (E. Bronte, 122) When that other existence
returns to her, she realizes that she has lost it, and in dividing the unity of those selves, has destroyed her soul. One half-self of Catherine's soul is the ghost-waif, which she sees in her mirror as she plucks feathers out of her pillow during her first brain fever. "Nelly, the room is haunted!" (E. Bronte, 161) she exclaims. Her divided spirit is already haunting her, as it will haunt Heathcliff for another eighteen years. A moment later she asks Nelly to open the door to release it, giving her "a chance of life" (E. Bronte, 163), as perhaps it will reunite with Heathcliff. Similarly, the other half-self is Heathcliff, left to wander the earth after her physical death as a testimony to his own soul's death with her, his physical and spiritual potential distorted and twisted into an unsatisfied rage. He is a howling anger, lashing all in his path. He accuses Catherine of murdering them both, and upon her death, he cries out "I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!" (E. Bronte, 204) Catherine also knows, though she recognizes her fate too late to change it, that she cannot survive without Heathcliff, any more than a split tree can survive the dismemberment.

The repression of Heathcliff and his violent return are the undoing of Catherine's marriage, based as it is upon only a limited recognition of her identity, and lead to the destruction of at least seven lives. The issue of
Catherine's identity, then, is of primary importance not only to her, but to everyone who surrounds her. In a similar way, *Jane Eyre* also confronts the issue of identity, the rage and passion of a woman's soul, and the potential for devastation when the unified self is threatened. And, as in *Wuthering Heights*, the most dangerous threats to that unity are offered by men.

Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* exhibits the same elements of the childhood twosome of Catherine and Heathcliff, though these forces are contained within one physical vessel, instead of two. Jane's ambivalent "gifts," which could be characterized as her inner Heathcliff, face the same threat of destruction. At moments of particularly heavy repression by those around her, those moments when chasms of discord arise within her soul, Jane's inner Heathcliff grows angry and violent; Jane's story is the journey she takes to reconcile the competing forces within her. Once this inner Heathcliff has overcome the forces of repression, and has found internal harmony in complete acceptance, the anger and violence dissipates, and the turbulence of searching for a unified self-identity subsides into the calm strength and composure of true psychic integrity. The essential difference between Jane Eyre and Catherine Earnshaw is that Jane does not succumb to the pressures of the world around her. Instead, she literally faces death rather than submit
to self-division, knowing that such a compromise would destroy her.

As a child, Jane appears to belong to no one and to have no place within the world of her experience. Freed, therefore, from the limitations of a fixed position in society, and occupying a more ambiguous social role than either Evelina or Catherine, she is able to transcend the narrow confines of a young lady and settle in a place of her own choosing. Acutely sensitive to the inner Heathcliff of her heart, she walks an uneasy path between the feminine and masculine, the inner world and the outer world, the imagination and the mundane.

It is at Gateshead that we are introduced to the competing forces churning within young Jane, which will dominate her voyage of self-discovery and spiritual synthesis. We realize immediately that she is possessed by a powerful imagination and a wild, uncontrollable passion. These 'masculine' traits are so closely linked within Jane as to be indistinguishable from each other, and Charlotte Bronte makes a point of this later, when Jane spends her free time weaving imaginative fantasies on the third floor of Thornfield, the very floor where Bertha Rochester has been confined as a result of her passions. Indeed, Jane suffers a similar confinement in the Red Room at the hands
of Mrs. Reed, after a passionate outburst at John Reed’s cruelty.

Like Heathcliff, however, this wild, passion of Jane’s is of ambivalent worth. It is most uncontrollable when it is most repressed - when the sting of injustice is most sharp - and once unleashed, possesses a fury and a power strong enough to frighten even Mrs. Reed. In the same way Catherine, after she has allowed a wedge to develop between herself and Heathcliff, can "neither lay nor control" his rage. But it is also during Jane’s experience in the Red Room that she first establishes a relationship with the protective moon-presence, a spiritual guardian of sorts, which plays an active role in her growing self-awareness. The inner Heathcliff of Jane can be prince or gypsy by turn, but the undiluted shock of confrontation nearly unhinges Jane, a clear warning of the dangers she faces when she lets this raw, imaginative power overwhelm her.

Among the most painful experiences to Jane is to be denied or misrepresented by those around her, a response shared by Evelina. At Gateshead, we see that though she is angered by the misrepresentations of herself, she has no personal power to assert her own definition to anyone other than herself. Instead, and again like Evelina, she is defined by those around her, invariably in negative terms. The power of defining is both visual and verbal. Visually,
she finds herself translated into what others see in her, as when she relates that "I saw myself transformed under Mr. Brocklehurst's eye into an artful, obnoxious child, and what could I do to remedy the injury?" (C. Bronte, 36) Visual power consistently belongs to masculine figures, such as Mr. Brocklehurst and Mrs. Reed, and Jane is always the victim of it. This visual power manifests itself in Jane, not in defending herself against allegations, but in visual arts, such as the picture books, and later her own drawings. Through art, Jane will define herself, first in an attachment to pictures which strike a resonant chord within her own imaginative heart, and later in her own artistic renderings of her thoughts and emotions.

The second type of power which she cannot yet combat is verbal. She is transformed verbally by Mrs. Reed, John Reed, and Bessie, among others, who describe her as a naughty, rude, scheming, toad. She relates that whenever she feels particularly repressed, she feels the overpowering urge to speak. And it is only when she begins to assert her own verbal truths that her position changes. In confrontation with John Reed and later her conversation with Mr. Lloyd, she begins to feel the power of her own words. It is with a new feeling of triumph that she finally tells Mrs. Reed what she will do with her newly discovered power of speech before she leaves for school.
So Jane is neither what people see nor what they say. Where does she situate herself? Significantly enough, her favorite spot is the window-seat. Drawing the curtains behind her to protect her from the gaze of those within, protected by the windowpanes from the elements without, she exists in neither one world nor the other. Sitting within the house, imprisoned by the domestic world which simultaneously rejects her, she gazes out upon the masculine world, which is equally inhospitable to her. She lives between the two, accepted by neither, yet yearning for something which incorporates them both. This is a unique position which Finch, Barbauld and Evelina could never have occupied entirely. Because in the same way as a governess Jane will live between the two worlds of the servants and the gentry, belonging to neither. She defines her own place, never slipping into a servant class, and resisting any attempts to draw her up into the aristocracy.

Jane leaves Gateshead full of her new self-awareness and feeling the new liberty of speaking the truth despite the consequences. When she arrives at Lowood, she encounters in Helen Burns a feminine voice whose power she recognizes as equal to the visual power of Brocklehurst. Helen does not allow herself to be defined by the vision Brocklehurst presents of her when he punishes her in front of the school. She reveals that Brocklehurst's opinions about Jane do not
pervert her identity among her classmates - indeed, his words are quite impotent within the school, and do not affect the students except to raise their opinion of anything he despises. This is a wondrous revelation to Jane, to see a chink in the authoritarian armor. Helen, in turn, is surprised at Jane’s willingness to do anything in exchange for love, even if it means allowing herself to be destroyed. Jane declares to Helen that,

To gain some real affection from you, or Miss Temple, or any other whom I truly love, I would willingly submit to have the bone of my arm broken, or to let a bull toss me, or to stand behind a kicking horse, and let it dash its hoof at my chest” (C. Bronte, 72).

Helen teaches Jane to see the integrity of her spirit as a thing to be cherished and protected, more valuable to her than any outside human force. Helen teaches Jane to acknowledge her inner self and submit to it in order to control it. Mrs. Reed had told Jane, "it is only on condition of perfect submission and stillness that I shall liberate you" (C. Bronte, 20). Ironically, Helen teaches her the spiritual equivalent, the "realization of self through
surrender" (Eagleton, 16). It is this self-awareness and determination to preserve her own integrity which give Jane the strength to leave Rochester when he offers her love without marriage. Her refusal to toss aside her responsibility to her self, and her commitment to her own integrity, eventually do give her both liberty and peace.

Jane’s relationship with Rochester is central to her spiritual and intellectual maturity, as it leads to a crucial decision point in her life. She "only marries Rochester when she can eventuate her full selfhood, in a relationship of complete mutual respect" (Wagner, 128). But such a harmonious relationship does not at first appear likely.

We are most struck in their early acquaintance by the power games they play with each other, his manifested in his eyes, and hers manifested in her words. His power is sexual and social, while hers is spiritual. His power is in observing her and describing her to suit his moods. Disguised as a gypsy, he describes her face so as to define her, "not so much analyzing Jane’s character as attempting to reconstitute it" (Bellis, 639). And after they become engaged, he insists upon pet names for her which suggest an imagery inappropriate to her own knowledge of herself, such as fairy, elf, sylph, and sprite. Visually, he tries to transform her, by the clothes he orders, the jewelry he
gives her, and even the bridal veil he selects. Jane recognizes this as a threat to her identity, as it is an attempt to reconstruct her into something she is not. Rochester, like Linton, is no Lord Orville. Jane responds with verbal power games, designed to tease him into anger and force him to acknowledge "the diverse rugged points" (C. Bronte, 275) in her character. Resenting the misrepresentation of herself, she fears she will lose an important part of herself forever, subject to Rochester's complete control, and unable to sustain her own integrity.

Beyond these expressions of verbal power over her, however, she is herself also an artist, and in her art, the masculine and feminine powers coincide. Her art is that "indestructable gem" (C. Bronte, 316) of her true, undivided self. Her art looks inward, focusing on inner truths which are unique and visionary rather than simply visual. This is the expression of her yearning, her fear, and her hope, the exploration of the divine within herself which Barbauld had also recognized.

And Jane has reason to fear, for she is indeed in danger of losing her true identity through her relationship with Rochester. If married, she would lose her ability to create herself and would become instead a creation of Rochester's, defined by his visions alone. Bertha, sneaking into Jane's room and donning the expensive wedding veil, is a warning of
Jane’s danger, "dramatizing the future ‘Mrs. Rochester’s’ specular status as an object to be revealed only to the husband’s gaze." (Bellis, 645) Jane would be defined as whatever Rochester chose to see. Significantly, Bertha tears up the bridal veil (which Jane had not wanted to wear) and tramples it on the floor. Jane’s inner Heathcliff appears as an externalized force which even the adult Jane cannot control.

Rochester’s ensuing proposition that Jane live as his mistress promises the same danger to her identity. This time, Jane sees the danger clearly and flees. For she knows that if she agrees to live as his mistress, she will be denying an important part of herself, dividing her soul. And not only does she see her own destruction in this, she also realizes that, having lost the part of her he loves, Rochester’s love would not last long. And so she would lose both herself and him. It is significant that it is the moon which speaks to her heart, "My daughter, flee temptation" (C. Bronte, 322), for the feminine moon itself appears engaged in constant flight from the overpowering light of the masculine sun. In the same way, Jane would have found the light of her fractured spirit swallowed up in the brilliant flare of Rochester’s passion.

Curiously enough, the seeming safety of her new-found cousins presents a similar danger to Jane in the form of St.
John Rivers. Here is a man who seems the antithesis of Rochester. Rochester had become her 'whole world', and almost her 'hope of heaven' (C. Bronte, 276), standing between her and heaven like an eclipse before the sun. But St John believes that he is her hope of heaven - he is the twisted mirror image of Catherine and Heathcliff, who see heaven only in each other. St. John can see "nothing beyond the boundaries of self," and incorporates God into himself, becoming almost pagan himself in his concept of divinity within humanity. Unlike Barbauld, though, his 'divineness' is offensively aggressive and dominating. He literally cannot see how Jane can reject him without rejecting God, as Catherine and Heathcliff could not find heaven except with each other, having no affinity to any other being.

But Jane sees the difference. And while she is willing to serve God with him as a partner, even if it means an early death in India, she is not willing to sacrifice her own soul in order to serve St. John, particularly since she had already refused to make a similar sacrifice to serve Rochester, a man she loved. As a woman with a divided soul, how could she truly serve God any more than she could love Rochester with only half a heart. St. John offers her the intellectual fulfillment she could never have achieved with Rochester, but as usual, the price is her soul. She would be entirely consumed by St. John's own intellectual passion.
and risk becoming another Bertha, unloved and denied spiritual freedom. And as an intellectual, an artist, or a missionary with a divided soul, she might as well have no soul at all, for all the good she might accomplish with her life’s sacrifice. Heathcliff’s fate, to live without his soul, will not be shared by Jane if she can help it.

All of these men, it seems, threaten the integrity of Jane’s spirit and in some cases her physical life. It is Bertha, in the end, who frees her, by setting the fire that maims and frees Rochester. He is freed to marry Jane because Bertha is dead. But he is also free to love Jane because he has lost his power over her and has ceased to be a threat. Bertha has plucked out the eye and cut off the hand that offended against Jane, freeing Jane to love Rochester without fear. At the same time, the wild spirit in Jane is stilled into contentment, since there is no longer any discrepancy between her undivided, authentic soul and what Rochester sees. She is his sight, taking over the responsibility of defining herself for him. She can continue the process of self-creation without opposition. Instead of painting representations of her inward struggles, she turns her gaze outward, to paint the world for him. Her vision, freed from turmoil, can expand outward. Correspondingly, she no longer is blinded in her vision of heaven by Rochester’s overpowering influence. Instead, they
both look out together, side by side, their individual spirits united only because they possess complete integrity as individuals first. Jane comes from the outside world, to rescue Rochester from "darkness and passivity," (Williams, 51) much as a knight might rescue sleeping beauty. She uses her power of vision and speech to "rehumanize" and "rekindle" Rochester's spirit (Bloom, 160). She has come a long way from gloating over Mrs. Reed. She does not abuse her power, as Rochester had done; she does not threaten to swallow up his identity, but supports him and shares her strength with him. She becomes his eyes and his power, but not his master.

It has often been lamented that Charlotte Bronte chose to tell this tale in first person narrative. Critics have complained that a character writing in the first person can only be known from the things the character says and does, and the style of the narration, rather than the views of others. But the first person narration confirms the point of the story. Despite the widely divergent descriptions of her character which would be entertained by others, we see a Jane whose "image of herself is remarkably stable" (Pickrel, 172), and we are not distracted by inaccurate portrayals characters such as Mrs. Reed might have supplied. Jane remains true to her heart and refuses to let her soul be repressed, reconstructed, or malformed by those
who would gladly try. She does not yield to the pressures of the society in which she moves. Not only does Jane recognize the value of her inner Heathcliff, she is determined to protect it at all costs against the hostile powers that surround her, and her success is the triumph of Jane's story.
CONCLUSION

Thus we see in the Brontes’ quests for spiritual wholeness the continuation of a tradition shared by Finch, Burney, and Barbauld. Their literary explorations of a feminine identity grounded in strength rather than weakness, in integrity rather than polarity, continue to yield new insights into the development of feminine identity. Their discovery of this allows the reclamation of the feminine principle as an impulse which cannot be contained within the narrow structure of British society challenges the foundations of that society. Both Charlotte and Emily Bronte’s characters are afforded the options of either unmitigated defiance or certain self-destruction. And the novels together present an interesting contrast in the consequences of each choice. Equally powerful in their portrayal of women’s psychological and spiritual dilemma, the Bronte sisters break free from the boundaries of convention to display a startling look at the issue of feminine identity.

Consistently, echoes of ancient goddess mythologies have found their way into the poetic imaginations of generations of British women writers. In reclaiming these nearly subconscious remnants of western civilization, all four
authors tapped into a powerful source of inspiration. A strong, sympathetic chord connects the insight of all these women and generations before them.

Whether this psychic sympathy is biological or cultural will probably never be determined. More importantly, the issue of feminine identity has continued to be debated through the twentieth century. Perhaps the modern concept of androgyny would have appealed to these women. But generations after Frances Burney set Evelina out to make her entrance in the world, the idealized figure of Lord Orville is still appealing precisely because still so rare. In the final analysis, the process of self-definition continues, as the twentieth century feminine psyche continues to struggle against both internal and external forces which often reflect but a glimmer of the human potential within.
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