

12-30-2018

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### Recommended Citation

Suarez, Anna (2018) "IN BETWEEN REALMS: THE SEARCH FOR FEMININE SELFHOOD IN THE ESSAIS OF MONTAIGNE," *Comparative Woman*: Vol. 1 , Article 5.

DOI: 10.31390/comparativewoman.1.1.04

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/comparativewoman/vol1/iss1/5>

IN BETWEEN REALMS: THE SEARCH FOR FEMININE SELFHOOD IN THE ESSAIS OF  
MONTAIGNE

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## Abstract:

My purpose is to explore factors of the Renaissance that determined women's selfhood in Montaigne's *Essais*. I argue that the shift into modernity is responsible for the loss of women's autonomy as well as the anxiety experienced by men regarding their power as well as their potential. Montaigne and Renaissance discourse defines women only by their bodies (sexual organs) and I explore the elements that established biological essentialism. This paper exemplifies comparative literature in the sense that it combines literature, theory, and art for the purpose of creating a well-researched examination of the root causes for why women were villainized and oppressed in the Renaissance era. I utilize feminist theory to discuss embodiment, which my argument defines as women being inseparable to their biological roles and the loss of their economic autonomy by way of them losing their property rights. Another aspect of embodiment in which I use is the loss of women midwives to male physicians, which calls for men to establish women's reproductive rights, furthermore, trap them inside the narrow male definition of woman. Paradoxically, women are embodied due to sexist power dynamics, but feared for their possible demonic powers. The fear of witchcraft in women is due to men's fear of castration and the tension that women will take away men's power. Art theory from the Renaissance integrates cultural attitudes towards women's bodies on a vast scale. This research paper is an exercise to examine the history of women's selfhood.

Montaigne's method is to merge the inward and the outward for the purpose of philosophical self-discovery. His critiques of ethics and politics do not extend past his own experience of manhood, reflecting his failure to advocate for cultural relativism, anti-imperialist attitudes, and openness of religious expression. His advocacy is inconsistent. The misrepresentation of feminine experience reveals the narrowness in his pedagogy. He seeks to

examine *himself* through the vessel of the feminine. The Essais are merely a gaze, which perpetuates feminine otherness through opposing realms of embodiment and esoteric dehumanization- an insistence upon selfhood that only appeals to masculine subjects, but more importantly, Montaigne.

The misinterpretation of feminine experience in the French Renaissance corresponds to the shift into a new era with dualistic ideologies. Restrictions of gender designated biological differences, excluding intersex experience. The feminine vessel Montaigne refers to is limited by genitalia- the embodied woman. The Renaissance era supported the methodology of Aristotle and Plato: men and women were born into designated roles. From an ontological standpoint, gender is not concretely established in birth. Cranford argues that Salic law prohibited women from inheriting the French throne because of Aristotelian reproductive science. Women's "seed" only contributed matter, whereas male seed contributed form (27). The Aristotelian notions of gender binaries relegated women's agency, which furthered masculine domination within the public and private sphere.

Power within the public and private sphere is representative of the loss of feudalism in the Renaissance. Since feudalism was privatized, women had the power to own property. During the Renaissance, aristocratic families faced the dictation of feudal power, stripping women of economic and social agency. Cranford draws the connection between the shifts in marital roles. Feudalism offered women sexual autonomy: illegitimate children were not ostracized by their families due to labor opportunities. Marriage was romantic and built a tight bond between two subjects. The Renaissance shifted the opportunities for power with fewer opportunities for women to work, and marital relations devolving into power relations, forcing women to be reduce *into the property*, rather than owning the property. Women became the land that sought to

be conquered due to goals for agricultural evolution. The romantic aspect of marriage faded into masculine desires for female subordination. Values such as chastity and compliance shaped women's selfhood, rather than feudal power and sexual freedom. Women began to lose their roles as midwives and the power of alchemy dissipated, which Cranford defines as a practice that was composed of both masculine and feminine elements. Alchemy established communities for women to work and support each other's craft as well as autonomy. Eventually, physicians started to discredit the success of midwives and dominated their work, calling forth further domination of women's reproductive health. Cranford believes that is a consistent reflection of Aristotelian values. Physicians started to take over the work that midwives would engage in, claiming that males have a sharper understanding of women's bodies. All of these combatting forces strived to aim a direct attack at women's power, whether that may be through their economic freedom, sexual freedom, right to work, or reproductive health. Every aspect of woman's lives were at threat of being taken away and their intellectual minds were consistently discredited, once again, the consequence of physicians confiscating midwives' jobs. Women were dominated by a new system, deeming them as incapable and were shamed by doctors, scientists, writers, and thinkers. There was tension between genders and fear that woman could take over due to their excellence as landowners, alchemists, and midwives. Men felt as though their authority needed to be reclaimed in order to manifest their selfhood so they took selfhood away from women (33). Montaigne's lens of developing his selfhood through world observations represents the tension about gender in France. His selfhood took pieces away from women due to his anxiety about their political power.

Subjects are born into their societal roles and expectations. Woman is born into her passivity and the path of a wife is already drawn for her. There are no opportunities for

autonomy, her future has already been decided. Aristotelian philosophy emerged as one of the most influential forces of the Renaissance. Aristotle's force guided the stripping of women's power with arguments that dehumanize women and define them by their bodies.

Cranford briefly elaborates on Marie de Gournay's influence in French renaissance culture, specifically how she challenged women's roles in the Renaissance period. De Gournay was a prominent feminist writer who advocated for women's education and autonomy. In addition to her role as a feminist writer, she was a dear friend to Montaigne. She spent time writing to him and reading his work. Choklakian explores de Gournay's *Le Proumenoir de Monsieur de Montaigne*. A historical paradox for women writers is, "early women writers were caught between their ambition to write like men and their need to write like women" (207). Most of de Gournay's texts lie unread and Cholakian postulates with Derrida's question, "Who is writing? To whom?" (207). The writings of women, an effort to try to emulate the masculinist renaissance approach to writing was abruptly lost in the confusion between writer and audience. Texts were not written for women, even if they were written *by* women. Cholakian defines this struggle as "attempts to deliver a message which has been misaddressed" (207). In a letter addressed to Montaigne, de Gournay reminds women to "stay on their guard," a statement clandestine for Montaigne's eyes.

"Who was de Gournay writing to?" and more importantly, "why did she address this letter to Montaigne?" (208).

When de Gournay's writings were discovered, passionate work vilifying male infidelity, the stories and letters were addressed to Montaigne, not women who could benefit from her instructions. Cholakian determines this paradigm as "under the sign of paternal patronage" (211).

De Gournay spent a portion of her life devoted to Montaigne, whether that is through mimicking his approach in the *Essais* or translating his work into Latin. However, de Gournay's intention was not to merely mimic and devote herself to Montaigne, but rather, to prove her ability to write in Latin and Greek. De Gournay found connection to the betrayed women of classical antiquity: Dido, Ariadne, and Philomela (211). In a text written by de Gournay, she encourages women to be cunning so they will not face betrayal from a man. Her letters to Montaigne reflect her cunning ability to tweak the system. Underneath her servitude to Montaigne are symbols untranslatable to men.

De Gournay had a covert mission: to prove that she was capable of understanding Latin and Greek, but more importantly, to prove that women had the potential to be educated. De Gournay has a hidden agenda within the translations, to provide women with the education they were robbed of. De Gournay must utilize the texts from Montaigne in order to establish the lack of feminine empowerment and understanding throughout his texts. In contrast with De Gournay's adamancy of educational opportunities for women, Montaigne demonstrates disturbing points about how women should be educated. Montaigne believes that women should utilize philosophy in order to submit to somber lives in passivity with men, rather than poetry as their craft because it encapsulates their "frivolous, deceptive, all for pleasure" nature. He states, "It is all for show, like them." A woman must be educated in philosophy as a coping mechanism for relationships with men or their aging experiences. Philosophy tames woman's hedonistic, frivolous nature.

De Gournay *did* create her community of womanly supporters, including, Anna Maria Van Schurman, whom she corresponded with in letters. In their letters, they critiqued their writing, and supported each other through the process of writing and educating themselves in

antiquity. Larsen takes the reader into their intimate relationship through writing in her essay, “A Women's Republic of Letters: Anna Maria van Schurman, Marie de Gournay, and Female Self-Representation in Relation to the Public Sphere.” The goal de Gournay and Schurman was to develop a system where they could exist within the public sphere, specifically, to exist as themselves, independent of men’s conceptions of what it means to be a woman (110). Though the writers firmly believed in the development of knowledge in classical antiquity, their goals as writers was much more subversive. In an age where antiquity was the pinnacle of knowledge, Schurman and De Gournay sought to prove themselves intellectually within the public sphere, encouraging the attitude: “if you can’t beat them, join them.” The mindset was merely to access the same educational opportunities men received, and foremost, to set a high standard for women’s intellectual potential. The intention was to rival men in The Republic of Letters, furthering the purpose of her correspondences with Montaigne. De Gournay Writes:

“Dare I in passing tell you philosophically a word from my limited perspective: language takes an inordinate and too long a time for a mind as capable of matters, and of the best as yours: nor is it useful for you to say, as you do, that you want to read the Originals in every case because their translated versions are not worthy of them.” (110)

De Gournay offers Schurman a valuable challenge: to not waste her time translating texts, rather, write her own texts. De Gournay advises Schurman to only spend time translating Latin and Greek, rather than romantic languages such as Spanish and French, proving the speculation of De Gournay’s relationship to Montaigne (111). De Gournay developed a relationship with Montaigne when she was young as a means to launch her writing and publishing career, which she excelled in. When she corresponded with Schurman, she hoped to develop a mother daughter relationship with her, preserving a bond amongst women in a corrupt world. In this instance,

both writers used their dedication and interpersonal relationship to launch a career, but more importantly, restore a private bond to bleed into the public, clearly, a bond of multifaceted academics. They sought allies to prove themselves just as capable as men in the literary sphere. De Gournay hoped Schurman would succeed in the future, in order to preserve the ambition of women seeking education. Their education establishes Montaigne's views of education in their own way, overcoming the experience of aging not for fear of beauty, but for fear that their legacy would be forgotten. The contrast between De Gournay's goals and Montaigne's blatant sexism reveals something deeper than what readers can find in her letters. De Gournay sought disposition as Montaigne did. She sought education for the prospect of her talent to be brought into the public and to ascend her own otherness, which Montaigne perpetuates in his work.

Montaigne's understanding of femininity is a juxtaposition between embodiment and otherness. "On Glory" traps women in their flesh: "To add just one word more on my original topic: I do not advise ladies to call their duty honor: their duty is the core: their honor, only the skin." Embodiment derives from the Cartesian distinction between mind and body, the rational versus irrational, and masculine versus feminine. Women are more attached to their body and "more biological" (Grosz 1994 14). While Montaigne searches for selfhood, he encourages his readers to develop a solid sense of self that does not succumb to influence. "On Glory" provides a distinction between the public and the private sphere. Names do not designate who we truly are, nor do our public personas. Our virtue is dependent on how we interact with the world in the private sphere, free from the gaze. The reader, despite the gender is able to read the text and relate to Montaigne's words until he declares that a woman's honor is her skin. Similar to the excerpt about "ornamentation," Montaigne makes a comparison to women's bodies as the totality of the self, specifically, only to be gazed upon within the public sphere. This notion

leaves little room for women within the private sphere, the space in which the self and virtue are developed. Skin acts as a restriction for women's transcendence into the rational, therefore, perpetuating their embodiment. The *Essais* exile women. The antithesis of Montaigne's ontology is that a subject's honor is their skin, moreover, women do not exist in a private sphere. Whether an ethical code for women is education to cope with marriage, aging, or desirable "skin," these values are public, consistently underneath a gaze. Without a private sphere, women do not exist. They disappear into mist as they walk alone.

Embodiment is a consistent theme in Montaigne's work, which he expands upon in his study of nature and habit. Montaigne is praised across disciplines for his forward-thinking mentality. Reeser discovers a contradiction throughout his work in *Theorizing Sex and Gender in Montaigne*. In Montaigne's essay, "On Some Verses of Virgil," he defines custom as a "series of repetitions that become pleasurable over time" (219). Habit is "a second nature and no less powerful" and "the habits and condition of each of us nature" (219). Given these definitions, gender as a habit cannot be disassociated from gender as natural (219). More explicitly, Montaigne assigns essentialist roles to women on the basis of their sexual organs in "On Some Verses of Virgil." Though Montaigne makes claims that gender's opposition is cultural, he clearly contradicts himself in his myths of feminine passivity.

Returning to "On Some Verses of Virgil," Montaigne connects the female sexual organs to feminine attitudes within the private sphere. Emotions are exclusive to women only:

"We would not see the same man charging into the breach with brave assurance, and later tormenting himself, like a woman, over the loss of a lawsuit or a son" (223).

Reeser argues that this statement reflects Montaigne assigning roles to women that derive from nature. Nature determines woman's quality of being prone to torment, and furthermore, her selfhood existing only within the domestic sphere, whereas the man exists on the battlefield.

Woman is defined by her yielding, whereas man is determined by action:

“When the man moves “inside” into the domestic sphere here, he risks acting passively, like the sexually internal woman” (223).

Reeser addresses the instability of existential progress for women due to the mentality women are determined passive inside the domestic sphere and men are active, a stable relationship with both genders furthers a stable relationship of the self with the self. However, that argument predetermines that masculine selfhood relies on the embodiment and oppression of women. The integral aspect of embodiment is the perpetuation of the myth that there is a direct correlation between body and gender. Montaigne consistently reduces women to body, skin, natural forces that displace women in uncertainty. Her moods are controlled by nature and must be tempered by men's education. Man must educate her. He must bring her existence into the public sphere as well as the domestic sphere. A woman is not active until a man pursues her. Montaigne must depend upon his own selfhood to clearly depict the embodied woman.

Embodiment reflects French Renaissance culture in the art world. Images of women with figures in nature and exaggerated voluptuous forms signified performative passivity- male fantasies. Zorah examines images of women in nature, especially with their influence on women's roles in *Blood, Milk, Ink, and Gold*. One of the most notable depictions of feminine embodiment is *Nature* by Niccolo Pericoli, which was brought to French courts in 1529. Though Montaigne was born shortly after the piece was brought to the court, the King often requested

pieces of art “laced with erotic allusiveness” (83). Pericoli’s piece illuminates the influential attitudes within the French court, which Montaigne claims he was part of.

In addition to the art representing a male fantasy, *Nature* by Pericoli is representative of the attitudes in French Renaissance culture: abundance, excess, eroticism, and earthliness. The sculpture portrays a woman composed entirely of breasts, swans, and newborn babies. She has her hands in her long hair while her face remains stoic. Zorah claims that *Nature* exemplifies the terrain of France: “rich in earthly abundance” and “primitive” (83). Moreover, *Nature* is representative of women’s designation to their supposed roles. She is composed of breasts and children, conveying women are defined by their biological counterparts. She indulges in a hedonist life, a mindset used by male philosophers to shame women. Zorah describes the relationship between femininity and nature “is expressed in visual terms at Fontainebleau through the rhyming of breasts and fruit, the entangling of limbs with vegetation, the proximity of the feminine and the animal” (85). Fontainebleau creates art for the dominant French upper class, painting symbols for women’s chains to men. In the ultimate setting of political power, art was a means to establish laws and ethics for members of French society, beyond the upper class.

Artists were successful when they contributed values that made their ways into the palace. Male fantasy is enmeshed in the code of ethics for women. Though the images are prominent in all classical antiquity, they were especially influential in France. The voluptuous, decadent, nymph-like woman is present not only in visual arts, but in “the rhetoric that writers (both French and Italian) use discussing French agricultural production” (85). It is not only present in agricultural production, the images are found throughout the writings of Montaigne, especially in his writings of nature and habit. Zorah further argues that “Mother” Earth derives from the French attitude of emphasizing France’s natural abundant sources. This attitude strips

woman of her humanity and transforms her into a source of production for the French economy (85). Womanhood is reliant on what can be produced or seen. The art speaks the words of Montaigne: “her only honor is her skin.” Her skin must be abundant and earthly. Her emotions must reflect the stoic faces of women in paintings: educated enough by men to accept the demise of her selfhood. With the privatization of feudalism, women were products of the Earth that stayed alive for male ownership, rather than women who directly interact with the Earth.

Before the Renaissance in the age of Feudalism, women had the power to interact with the Earth, a symbiotic relationship undefined by hierarchies. Embodiment surfaced in French socio-cultural attitudes when women lost their economic and social Freedom, thus they became the Earth, unfortunately, not in the sense of being celebrated, respected, and worshipped. Woman as Earth is conquerable and exploited. Men desire to transcend her glory through their desire for power and domination. France is celebrated for its abundant natural resources, anthropomorphized as woman, the lands are exploited for economic growth. To view woman from this lens, ascribes her passivity by nature. In “On some Lines of Virgil,” Montaigne remarks a variety of sexist claims regarding feminine passivity. Montaigne states:

“It pains me that my *Essays* merely serve ladies as a routine piece of furniture- something to put in their *salon*. The chapter will get me into their private drawing-rooms; and I prefer my dealings with women to be somewhat private: the public ones lack intimacy and savor” (956).

Once again, Montaigne is exposing his desire to enter the feminine realm as women *yield* to him, their private life, once again, does not exist. He must insert himself into their private lives. It is interrupted by his fantasy to own the aspects of her that are kept hidden. Women’s private lives

are a retreat from male domination, but men do not believe women are deserving of this time. As France excelled in their economic, agricultural growth, women represented the land overcome by male power. Throughout *On Some Lines of Virgil*, Montaigne describes women as “our women” and assigns them duties, simply based upon their biological construction. There is little to no discussion of their mental capacities beyond the physical realm. Though Montaigne takes an earthly position in describing women’s roles, he enters an opposing realm of the esoteric to further dehumanize women. His contradictions represent his failure to understand women and his failure to build an inclusive ethical framework.

Though the natural agricultural growth is an aspect of French culture, the “witch craze” not only influenced the cultural sphere of early modern societies, but it also influenced the economic and institutional practices (2). Kramer identifies masculine values in her essay, “Performing the Demonic: Witchcraft, Skepticism, and Gender Constructions in Michel de Montaigne’s “De la force de l’imagination” and “Des Boyteux.” Kramer pinpoints the witch craze as a public stage, a “dramatization of the social, religious, philosophical, and political wars of the period” (2). In both of Montaigne’s Essays: “De la force de l’imagination” and “Des Boyteux” attaches the prominent skeptical attitude of women’s nature, accusations of their possible relationship with witchcraft. There is a connection between Montaigne’s writings on demonology and witchcraft to the act of discovering the self through the writing process. Kramer argues, “male selfhood and identity which concentrates on sexual psychopathology and is deeply rooted in the Renaissance discourse of sexuality and gender identity” (3). Montaigne utilizes a mixture of literature, history, philosophy, and his own body of ethics to discover his identity, however, through the process of his male selfhood, he antagonizes women because they are

“other,” due to their esoteric disobedience. This attitude is representative of the relationship between the masculine subject to the feminine other.

Kramer closely reads “De la force de l’imagination” for evidence of woman’s role as other, but more importantly, a demonic force casting spells for male impotency. Kramer argues that male fantasies, fear, anxiety, and lack of control over male sexual organs rely on the interactions with women. This attitude is an aspect of renaissance sexual discourse. In an essay by Montaigne, he describes an episode involving the Egyptian King:

“he that before had in every there place found and showed himselfe a lustie gallant, found himselfe so short, when he came to grapple with her, he threatened to kill her, supposing it had beene some charme or sorcerie” (13).

Montaigne offers validation for men with their castration fear in “De la force de l’imagination:”

“Men have reason to checke the indocile liberty of his member, for so importunately insinuating himselfe when we have no need of him, and so importunately or as I may say impertinently failing...” (11).

These attitudes describe a direct threat to male dominance and the cultural order of renaissance culture. The displacement of women as demonic, evil beings establishes the notion that men carelessly interact with women and do not experience their good nature, devotion, and love. They are threatened by their misinterpretations.

Similar to De Gournay’s experience of utilizing Montaigne in order to communicate to women, witchcraft is one of the few means to access their own power. De Gournay had to seek covert plans in order to educate herself, prove her intelligence, but more importantly, ascend her

own embodiment. Witchcraft is a force that does transcend the earth in a stronger way than production, therefore, the fear of women performing spells or rituals, denotes the man's fear of losing his power over women. Renaissance men view women as merely their genitalia, but the similarity lies within how men view *themselves*. Montaigne's biggest fear about women is the possibility of losing his power and the symbol of his power is the phallus. Though both men and women are heavily actualized by their sexual organs, women's ability to cause deeply rooted anxiety about castration fear is once again, an aspect of her binding to sexualization. The only knowable damage she can cause upon man is sexual. There is fear of what is unknowable: what exists beyond nature and more importantly, woman. Much like nature's mystery, woman holds truth under her skin, not desire for violence as interpreted by men, but a deep desire for power.

The fear of women came to light as a result from the transition into modernity, which bred for fear of witchcraft, but also arising to further economic power than what was possible in feudalism. Cranford targets modernity as a source for men's fear of women. The shift into new politics, economic values, and striving for a politically and economically stronger society increased male anxiety about women climbing the political ladder and actualizing themselves as powerful, capable women (26). This fear developed into hatred and dehumanization of women. Embodiment, though, opposing to dehumanization is paradoxically similar in the sense that women are stripped of human experience, whether that may be as a witch or as matter.

Sex defined women's worth and sex had the power to strip women from their worth. Sex allowed women more marital rights and autonomy, only if they were able to birth children. The self did not come from within, instead it was established through relationships in the court or in marriage. There was no individual identity, which is why Montaigne developed womanly identity in his work. Both opposing realms of embodiment and otherness are found present in

Aristotelian philosophy, a vast influencer in the early modern Renaissance. According to Aristotle, women are not whole beings and perhaps “monstrous.” Woman is a deformity, perhaps a mutation that is only useful for men’s selfhood. The monstrous aspect directly corresponds to the witch. Montaigne feared a woman coming to him in the night and violently taking away his power, but more importantly, a means to further his line. His member is a means to continue the line of men in power that seek to dominate women (30). Cranford states that men were “born this way,” with a biological feature that gave them absolute entitlement, in the way that they felt entitled to women’s bodies, to such a large extent that they defined women’s identity through their own ability to be “born this way” (30).

Montaigne’s views on marriage in “*On some Verses of Virgil*,” is the most efficient order of relations between subjects (17).

Women due to their unidentifiable esoteric prowess are at fault for influencing male dominance within the marriage bed. Montaigne states:

“Married me, because time is at their command, and they may go to it when they list, ought never to presse or importune their enterprise, unless they be readie...” (17).

Women are present in these realms so they are immediately at fault for threatening male dominance, and more importantly, the social roles decided by marital order (17). Women’s use of witchcraft is representative of their forced submission in marriage and male impotency denotes men’s failure to dominate his spouse. This is once again, actualizing the relationship between masculine selfhood and other. Men are able to discover themselves through Montaigne’s texts because his philosophy is only applicable to men. Women are passive and yielding, but at the same time, demonic and unpredictable. There is a lack of reliable description

of the feminine self, which excludes women from Montaigne's philosophical discourse.

Concerning the self, in Kritzman's essay examining "De la Diversion," the human subject is at risk, but more importantly, this risk of human subject applies to women. Kritzman argues:

"the human subject is always already the victim of the radical discontinuity of the self; the kinetic energy generated by the mind renders it other to itself by displacing the subject from the locus where in principle it should be" (202).

With Montaigne's declarative statements about human experience, the reader is alienated as they do not fit into his discussion of what exactly *human experience is*. It is not detectable reading Montaigne as a woman. The subject is displaced in the process of reading the texts because the rhetoric of Montaigne causes a distinct tearing in between experiences of men and women. When women are ascribed to passivity and men play the active role, the feminine subject is already undeveloped and not whole.

Montaigne's texts declare a lack of understanding of the feminine experience, though he appears to be against binaries. The texts prove a distinction between masculine and feminine experience. Though it reflects cultural attitudes of the renaissance, these attitudes are perpetuated throughout his *Essais*. In this regard, it is important for the reader to distinguish the attitudes, which are detrimental to women's sense of self, and more importantly, it is important to distinguish that the experience of reading these philosophical texts for women causes feelings of alienation. Though both realms: embodiment and esoteric dehumanization are opposing, there lies a crucial connection between the two. In both of these opposing realms, masculine dominance over the feminine is present. Within these structures present in the text, women are depicted as a risk to masculine selfhood. Woman as a witch is a threat to masculine selfhood, yet

paradoxically, it is pivotal that whether it is the woman's body (earthly abundance) or the passive wife cultivate masculine selfhood. Woman plays a crucial role in this regard, to actualize the self of men, rather than an autonomous self.

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