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JANE WEST'S FEMININE IDEALS OF THE 1790s

Eleanor Ty¹

In the 1790s, Jane West, better known by her pseudonym, Prudentia Homespun,² was one of the most active participants in the so called "war of ideas," the "feminist controversy in England," or the battle between the Jacobins and Anti-Jacobins.³ Her three novels of the period, *The Advantages of Education; or the History of Maria Williams* (1793); *A Gossip's Story* (1796); and *A Tale of the Times* (1799),⁴ have been read as examples of conservative tracts, or didactic fiction for young ladies. Claudia Johnson points out that "Jane West was the

¹ I wish to thank Wilfrid Laurier University for providing me with a Short-Term Grant to complete the research for this essay.

² Isobel Grundy notes that Jane West took the name "Prudentia Homespun" from Charlotte McCarthy, Irish poet and religious writer, whose *Letter to the Bishop of London* (1767?) bears this name. See Virginia Blain, Isobel Grundy, & Patricia Clements, *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 683, 1151.

³ On the debate of the 1790s, see Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975); and Gary Kelly, *The English Jacobin Novel 1780-1805* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976). In 1974 Garland Publications issued a series of 43 works under the title "Feminist Controversy in England, 1788-1810". Four of these titles are by Jane West.

⁴ References are to the following editions: Jane West, *The Advantages of Education; or the History of Maria Williams* (1793), introduction by Gina Luria (New York: Garland, 1974); *A Gossip's Story and a Legendary Tale*, 2 vols., 4th ed. (London: T.N. Longman & O. Rees, 1799); *A Tale of the Times* (1799), introduction by Gina Luria (New York: Garland, 1974).

most distinguished to dramatize Burkean fictions with little adulteration...idealizing the patriarchal family with unremitting earnestness and insistence."⁵ According to Johnson, West's novels support Edmund Burke's arguments in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) and its sequel, *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791), that "private worth and domestic confidence alone can secure the nation's survival against the forces of anarchy."⁶ West's works idealize the father figure of the family, demonstrating that the benevolent patriarch is the best ruler of the home, just as a prudent and judicious monarch is the best governor of the country. Another reason West's name is known to scholars is because *A Gossip's Story*, with its story of two sisters, is believed to have inspired Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*.⁷

Little else, however, has been written about Jane West. Because West's novels are thinly disguised conduct books with obvious lessons, they have not attracted the attention of twentieth-century scholars who have, as one critic says, gravitated "instead toward the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft; it is far easier to identify with Wollstonecraft's revolutionary sympathies."⁸ West's novels are generally regarded as fairly straightforward didactic fiction focusing on female education.⁹ Didacticism notwithstanding, West's novels are much more problematic than has been acknowledged, particularly in their attempts to prescribe the ideal female subject in late eighteenth-century society. For in each of the three novels in this decade, West does more than just outline the model woman, she also represents and constructs the negative, or what Julia Kristeva calls the "abjected" other¹⁰ of this exemplary. The three novels

⁵ Claudia Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 6.

⁶ Johnson, *Jane Austen*, 4.

⁷ See Butler, *War of Ideas*, 101; Katherine Sobba Green, *The Courtship Novel, 1740-1820: A Feminized Genre* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 116; and Colin Pedley, "'The Inward Dispositions of the Heart': Jane Austen and Jane West," *Notes and Queries* 36.2 (1989): 169.

⁸ Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Their Fathers' Daughters: Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth, and Patriarchal Complicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 5.

⁹ For brief discussions of this, see Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angellica: Women, Writing and Fiction, 1660-1800* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 233; Johnson, *Jane Austen*, 7; and Green, *Courtship Novel*, 116.

¹⁰ See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), especially Ch. 1.

of the period all feature not one protagonist, but a pair of heroines who are played off against each other. Patricia Spacks suggests that these pairs, sometimes sisters, as in *A Gossip's Story*, are reminiscent of sibling rivalry in fairy tales which "implicitly reassure the reader about envious or rivalrous feelings toward sibling competitors by equating struggles between brothers or sisters with the ancient conflict of good and evil and by offering outcomes in which right always triumph, outcomes both psychologically and morally comforting."¹¹

While this is a possible explanation for the two-heroine structural feature of West's novels of the 1790s, I want to argue instead that what West does is actually to construct and support what Ellen Pollak has termed "the myth of passive womanhood" by means of a story. Pollak writes:

The peculiar advantage of this mimetic feature of myths is that it enables certain logical contradictions to be presented plausibly. The contradictions are obscured by being brought within a discursive order that constitutes the world according to culturally sanctioned axioms and laws. In this way, ideological consistency can be passed off as logical consistency, and systems of knowledge (which are inevitably systems of value too) can operate as narratives of fact.¹²

My paper focuses on the way West constructs this myth of the feminine, particularly in its reliance on binary opposites or on what Jacques Derrida calls "différance" as a means of signification. What is fascinating about West's ideal woman is that she can only be created through opposites to or differences from the negative "other." This reliance on the other to authenticate subjectivity suggests the precarious basis of the exemplary, as she is dependant upon the abjected other for her existence. In other words, she is, to a great extent, the opposite of what the object of revulsion is, rather than a subject who is able to exist independently, or achieve what

¹¹ Patricia Meyer Spacks, "Sisters," in *fetter'd or free? British Women Novelists, 1670-1815*, ed. Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1986), 136.

¹² Ellen Pollak, *The Poetics of Sexual Myth: Gender and Ideology in the Verse of Swift and Pope* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 5.

Derrida calls determinate meaning or transcendental signification.¹³ Derrida's theory of difference and signification is useful in reading West's novels as it highlights the instability and indeterminacy of her concept of the ideal female. The fact that West's narratives go to so much trouble to depict in painful details the plight of the "other" suggest an awareness of, if not fascination for what Kristeva calls the "powers of horror" or abjection. Telling the story of the abjected other becomes a means of controlling the disruptive forces which threaten the ideology of what Poovey has termed the "proper lady."¹⁴

Because of its obvious use of sisters who are opposites of each other, *A Gossip's Story* is perhaps the best illustration of this problematic construction. As in her first novel, West uses the persona of the spinster, Prudentia Homespun, to relate the story. The voice of this ironic and self-deprecating narrator frames the story of the two sisters self-consciously, rather like a Henry Fielding narrator did earlier on in the century. More than just accompanying readers through the journey however, Prudentia Homespun herself becomes a fictional character. She tells her readers, for example, about her retired life:

I have been for several years the inhabitant of a small market-town called Danbury, in the north of England...my family consists of only myself, a female servant, and an old tabby cat, I have but little domestick care to engage my attention and anxiety. (I: 1)

What is interesting about this fictional autobiography is its antithesis to the author's real life. West herself was hardly a spinster; she was married to a yeoman farmer, Thomas West, and had three sons.¹⁵ While this may seem like a piece of biographical trivia, I think that it does relate very much to the ideological construction and creation of the model feminine figure that I am exploring. Prudentia claims that she associates

¹³ Derrida explains that "the absence of a transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely." Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 280.

¹⁴ Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), Ch. 1.

¹⁵ Pamela Lloyd, "Some New Information on Jane West," *Notes and Queries* 31.4 (1984): 469.

with "many single ladies" who have "established a very agreeable society, which meets three times a week, to communicate the observations which the levity of youth, the vanity of ostentation, or the meanness of avarice have suggested" (I: 2). The members of this "scandalous club...exhibit models of prudence" in their conduct and "shew no mercy to others" (I: 2, 3). This figure can be seen as a female version of the detached "man about town" or "spectator" figure who can comment upon the activities of the inhabitants with a certain ironic detachment.

While one could argue that this figure of the old gossipy woman provides an ideal vantage point from which to observe the goings-on of the town, I think that the use of this spinster figure has deeper ramifications in the novel than mere convenience. In the eighteenth century, old maids occupied an unenviable position in society, and were generally "scorned and pitied."¹⁶ They were often caricatured in novels and seen to have "no respectable role" except as governess or companion.¹⁷ Kern notes that they often "appeared in men's novels as sex-starved, frustrated, and disagreeable stereotypes" though women novelists tended to be more sympathetic to this figure and "individualized their old maid characters beyond stereotypes."¹⁸ The point is that West adopted this disagreeable role, not out of necessity, but by choice.¹⁹ Her fictional spinster seems fairly self-sufficient, and is economically independent, as she possesses a small, regular annuity. However, as an "old maid" she would not be expected to lead any kind of a sexual life. That West chose to write from the stance of this sexually detached or restrained figure is significant. Her narrator cannot be accused of any sexual impropriety, or of neglecting domestic duties. Because of her non-participation in sexual, maternal and child-bearing roles, she is distanced from many of the earthly,

¹⁶ Elizabeth Bergen Brophy, *Women's Lives and the 18th-Century English Novel* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1991), 230.

¹⁷ Jean Kern, "The Old Maid, or 'to grow old, and be poor, and laughed at'" in *fetter'd or free? British Women Novelists 1670-1815*, ed. Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1986), 201.

¹⁸ Kern, "The Old Maid," 201.

¹⁹ In *Letters to a Young Lady, in Which the Duties and Character of Women are Considered* (1806), introduction by Gina Luria, 3 vols. (New York: Garland, 1974), II: 89-90, West argues that "single women" do not necessarily have to "pass their lives in a dull mediocrity...Destitute of nearer ties, and unfettered by primary obligations, the whole world of benevolence affords a sphere for their actions, and the whole circle of science offers to adorn their minds."

physical, and biological functions usually associated with woman. Deprived of what are traditionally considered "female" functions, she is almost neuter or gender-free. It is revealing that West has to go to such lengths of de-feminization to establish credibility as a critic of social mores.

I am not suggesting that West advocated the single state as the ideal one for all women. But the adoption of the old maid-narrator figure does have some bearing on her construction of the feminine ideal. In West, the exemplary woman is similarly free from libidinous desire and sexual improprieties. Female sexuality and pleasure become a non-issue in her scheme of domestic perfection. This is an area where West differs from a more radical thinker like Wollstonecraft. Mitzi Myers has convincingly argued that both the Evangelical Hannah More, who is usually regarded as a conservative moralist, and the vindicator of the "rights of woman," Mary Wollstonecraft, shared the desire to reform female manners, and "to replace the regnant ideal of pliant, unproductive urbanity with socially functional middle-class models."²⁰ Particularly in her early work, *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft stressed the need for female education in order to counter women's sensibility, "susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment...weakness."²¹ She believed that reason could "teach passion to submit to necessity; or, let the dignified pursuit of virtue and knowledge raise the mind above those emotions which rather imberber than sweeten the cup of life, when they are not restrained within due bounds."²² However, what Myers does not point out is that by the time Wollstonecraft wrote *The Wrongs of Woman; or Maria*, the lesson of restraint was not quite so clear cut. Between 1792 and 1797, or between the publication of *Rights of Woman* and *Wrongs of Woman* Wollstonecraft had had two passionate love affairs, one with Gilbert Imlay and the other with William Godwin whom she later married. Poovey says that from the relationship with Imlay Wollstonecraft "developed...not only a new acceptance of her own emotionalism but also a new openness to emotional dependence and a resolution not to rest content with theories

²⁰ Mitzi Myers, "Reform or Ruin: A Revolution in Female Manners," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 11 (1982): 204.

²¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Carol H. Poston, 2nd ed., (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1975), 9.

²² Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 31.

that denied felt desires of body and heart."²³ In her last novel *Wrongs of Woman* the heroine succumbs to the possibility of romance despite a bad marriage. While the judge rebukes Maria with the comment, "[w]hat virtuous woman thought of her feelings,"²⁴ we are not left with the impression that Wollstonecraft agrees with his pronouncement. A woman's feeling, sexuality, and passion were important, and not to be discounted.

Though West, like More and Wollstonecraft, shared the wish to reform women, her views of sexuality were very different from Wollstonecraft's. Not surprisingly, in her novels written in the same period, the good heroines, while not spinsters, are those who are sexually restrained. They tend to sacrifice their own feelings and desires in order to submit to parental or spousal duty. In *A Gossip's Story*, the elder sister, Louisa Dudley, who grows up under her father's tutelage, becomes an ideal example of filial obedience:

Louisa, who from her earliest years discovered a disposition to improve both in moral and mental excellence, listened with attention to her father's precepts, illustrated at times by the painful yet pleasing description of what her mother was. Instructions thus enforced by example, sunk with double weight into her retentive mind, and she early nursed the laudable ambition of copying those amiable virtues, of which her departed mother and living father exhibited such fine models. (I: 15).

Louisa learns right and wrong from the father, and though the name of the mother is mentioned, in the novel because the mother dies early, she is unreal, idealized, and silent.²⁵ In other

²³ Poovey, *Proper Lady*, 83.

²⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary and the Wrongs of Woman*, ed. Gary Kelly (New York: Oxford World's Classics, 1976), 199.

²⁵ Paradoxically, in her other works, West stresses that mothers and maternal figures are important to a young lady's development. For instance, in the poem, *The Mother: A Poem in Five Books*, 2nd ed. (London: Paternoster-Row, 1810), West writes:

Mothers, 'tis yours to form a reptile swarm
Of sceptics, or a host of Christians fraught
With faith and hope divine. 'Tis also yours
To sow the seeds of moral purity,
Or fan the infant-passions till they blaze,

words, she occupies the place of the stereotypical inspirational muse or angel. Whatever virtues she did or did not possess are created or re-presented by the father who has the power to tell her story to the daughters.

Marianne Dudley, on the other hand, has had an upbringing which has been feminine-based, and hence negative, in the narrator's view. It has encouraged too much sensibility in her:

Marianne experienced under her Grandmother, all the fond indulgence of doating love. If ever the excesses of tenderness are pardonable, they might be in Mrs. Alderson's circumstances...It was natural to view the child which her daughter had bequeathed her, with an affection rising to agonizing sensibility. (I: 16)

Marianne had a variety of instances of high heroick virtue to produce, not drawn indeed from actual observation of life, but from her favourite studies. She had long been an attentive reader of memoirs and adventures, and had transplanted into her gentle bosom all the soft feelings and highly refined sensibilities of the respective heroines. (I: 38)

As a reader of romances, Marianne has developed excessive emotions, the "soft feelings" of heroines. This difference in background and character becomes the crux of the novel as it determines the sisters' fate. Louisa represses her own feelings and desires, and thinks of her father's welfare before her own. She allows her father to direct her in the choice of a husband, consenting at one point to marry the disagreeable Sir William Milton. The father tells her: "personal considerations are beneath your attention. Defect in character is the unavoidable lot of humanity" (I: 67). Conversely, Marianne, who is courted by a much more worthy suitor of whom her father approves, rejects him because he does not live up to her

Fed with infernal fuel. (94)

However, only one of West's four novels of this period features a model mother. Lucy Evans' mother in *The Advantages of Education* is the only mother who provides her daughter with guidance and love. In her other works, including *Tale of the Times*, *Letters to a Young Lady*, and *The Infidel Father* 3 vols. (London: T. N. Longman & O. Rees, 1802), mothers die young, or are absent, and therefore are powerless or unable to give their daughters counsel and care.

expectations formed by her reading of "memoirs and adventures" (I: 38):

he seemed much more gay and lively than was consistent with the painful suspense in which courtship ought to keep the lover's heart. His manner was unembarrassed, which was wrong; he was comfortable in her absence; her preference indeed seemed to give him satisfaction, but not of the transporting kind she expected. (I: 45)

As can be expected, the consequences of these two attitudes are predicatable. The obedient Louisa is saved from the union with Sir Milton, cares for her father through a period of poverty and illness, and is eventually rewarded with the wealthy and loving Pelham. The over-imaginative Marianne marries the romantic Mr. Clermont, only to find that the passion and ardour of romance quickly fade. Her alliance is fraught with jealousy, grief, and misunderstandings.

While the bifurcation of the histories of the two sisters may sound like an innocuous tale designed for the edification of young ladies, its positioning of women reveals much about what one critic calls the "dominant myths of our culture."²⁶ In particular, reading the narrative through feminist psychoanalytic theories reveals compelling patterns and implications about the structure of West's novel. Marianne Hirsch's adaptation of Freud's notion of "family romance" is useful for reading this and other women's texts:

The family romance describes the experience of familial structures as discursive: the family romance is the story we tell ourselves about the social and psychological reality of the family in which we find ourselves and about the patterns of desire that motivate the interaction among its members.²⁷

As Julia Kristeva says:

²⁶ Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 4.

²⁷ Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989) 9.

Narrative is, in sum, the most elaborate kind of attempt, on the part of the speaking subject, after syntactic competence, to situate his or her self among his or her desires and their taboos, that is at the interior of the oedipal triangle.²⁸

In *A Gossip's Story* West situates her good heroine clearly under what Lacan would call the Name of the Father.²⁹ The daughter who obeys the father becomes successfully integrated into the social structure or the Lacanian symbolic order towards the end of the novel. Marianne, however, is linked to the mother who is killed off, and subsequently brought up by a substitute maternal figure, her grandmother. Because the grandmother Mrs. Alderson "had lost an amiable and only daughter," she views Marianne as "a pledge from an inhabitant of another world, a relique snatched from the grave, a bond of union between herself and the glorified spirit of its immortal mother" (I: 16, 17). This maternal bond, associated in the novel with death, the weak, the sentimental, and the excessive, ultimately leads to the destruction of Marianne's emotional and psychological well-being.

West explains her didactic intentions in creating Marianne:

In her character I wish to exhibit the portrait of an amiable and ingenuous mind, solicitous to excel, and desirous to be happy, but destitute of natural vigour or acquired stability; forming to itself a romantick standard, to which nothing human ever attained; perplexed by imaginary difficulties; sinking under fancied evils; destroying its own peace by the very means which it takes to secure it. (I: 47)

A socio-historical and literary analysis of the configuration of the sisters would interpret the essential theme of the novel to be that of the debate between eighteenth-century reason and passion. Marianne's penchant for heroics would align her with her namesake in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, with the young Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, or with Sheridan's foolish Lydia Languish. Of this tradition, Janet Todd says,

²⁸ As quoted by Hirsch, *Mother/Daughter Plot*, 9-10.

²⁹ See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), Ch. 6.

"From the 1780s onwards, sentimental literature and the principles behind it were bombarded with criticism and ridicule....As the eighteenth century closed, sensibility was viewed more and more as anti-community, a progressing away from, not into, Humean social sympathy."³⁰ A historical approach would read West's novel as an Anti-Jacobin tract in support of Burke and the conservatives.³¹ The novel warns young women against forming their judgments based solely on their feelings, and reinforces the notion that patriarchal authority is in fact the best guarantor of individual happiness. What these readings do not uncover, however, are the implications and assumptions for women behind the narrative's "family romance". The sisters' alliances to male and female authority figures and the differing consequences form remarkable patterns in the light of post-Lacanian psycholinguistics. In psychoanalytic terms, the ideal that West is able to achieve at the end is one that, for the daughter, entails the complete rejection of the mother, and the embracement of the father and his Law.

However, what is most striking about West's novels of the decade following the upheaval of the French revolution is their fascination for the misguided sister or friend who is intended as the negative other of the ideal female heroine. The fact that it takes two girls to construct this feminine ideal in her three novels of this period suggests West's preoccupation with and perhaps even fear of the excesses of the female philosopher figure. West does not consciously create characters who represent Mary Wollstonecraft or Mary Hays, as Maria Edgeworth, Elizabeth Hamilton, or Amelia Opie were later to do,³² but her "bad sister" or negative figures, Marianne Dudley in *A Gossip's Story*, Charlotte Raby in *The Advantages of Education*, and Geraldine Powerscourt in *A Tale of the Times*,

³⁰ Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), 141, 136.

³¹ For example, Gary Kelly, *English Fiction of the Romantic Period 1789-1830* (London & New York: Longman, 1989), 319.

³² Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801), introduction by Eva Figes (London: Pandora, 1986), 208 features a Wollstonecraftian Harriot Freke who cries "Vive la liberte" in a chapter called "Rights of Woman." Hamilton's *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, 3 vols. 3rd ed. (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1800-1801) has a character called Bridgetina Botherim who is modelled after Hays' heroine, Emma Courtney. Opie's *Adeline Mowbray, or the Mother and Daughter* (1804), introduction by Jeanette Winterson (London: Pandora, 1986), based on the life of Wollstonecraft, features a heroine who refuses marriage because of her beliefs.

all act rashly and are self-willed. What West says about Geraldine Powerscourt, for example, could be applied to the real-life Mary Wollstonecraft: her story is "an awful moment to all those who, trusting in the supposed security of their own virtue, neglect the suggestions of prudence" (III: 295). To emphasize the Jacobin or revolutionary link, Geraldine's seductor, Fitzosborne, guided by the "false philosophy...founded upon the visionary perfectibility of the human species,"¹¹ kills himself to avoid being guillotined under Robespierre's reign (III: 374).

I want to argue that West's horror and, at the same time, fascination with these females who represent defiance of authority and transgression can be explained by Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. Kristeva describes abjection as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience."¹⁴ The problem with Kristeva's theory is its tendency towards essentialism. Abjection is linked to the maternal: "abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be."¹⁵ The abject "is the violence of mourning for an "object" that has always already been lost. The abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgments. It takes the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away."¹⁶ For both West and Kristeva, the subject needs to keep these disruptive, feminine impulses in check in order to define itself as a subject.

Furthermore, in certain religions, abjection is hemmed in through "prohibition and law," or it can persist as "exclusion or taboo."¹⁷ As one critic puts it, "Kristeva is fascinated by the

¹¹ This notion of perfectibility is meant to ridicule William Godwin and his radical followers. In *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, ed. K. Codell Carter (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 58-9, Godwin writes: "man is perfectible...By perfectible, it is not meant that he is capable of being brought to perfection. But the word seems sufficiently adapted to express the faculty of being continually made better and receiving perpetual improvement; and in this sense it is here to be understood."

¹⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

¹⁵ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 10.

¹⁶ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 15.

¹⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 16, 17.

ways in which "proper" sociality and subjectivity are based on the expulsion or exclusion of the improper, the unclean, and the disorderly elements of its corporeal existence that must be separated from its "clean and proper" self."¹⁸ It is this aspect of abjection, that I think is most applicable to Jane West's creation of the irresponsible or self-willed sister. Kristeva believes that "what must be expelled from the subject's corporeal functioning can never be fully obliterated but hovers at the border of the subject's identity, threatening apparent unities and stabilities with disruption and possible dissolution."¹⁹ Hence, in West, this negative "other" of the feminine ideal is invoked yet prohibited, precariously created, yet denied existence in the patriarchal world of late eighteenth-century England.

This threatening "other," as I have suggested is associated with the French anarchists, the excessive, and, in the case of *A Gossip's Story*, with the maternal. West intends these characters to be negative examples, demonstrating what the ideal woman should not do. Yet the extent to which she describes their stories in detail imply an obsessive preoccupation, if not fascination with them. Marianne in *A Gossip's Story*, for example, is in many ways more interesting as a character than Louisa. Unlike her sister, she is different and also distanced from her father. She is afraid of him, and yet refuses his counsel. At one point, before an interview with him regarding a suitor, fear renders Marianne incapable of receiving paternal advice: "She so deeply pondered on the probable consequences of the interview with her father, that her mind was rendered too weak to derive any benefit from it" (I: 91). Yet later, when her father tells Marianne to resign her "extreme sensibility" (II: 41) in her dealings with her husband, Marianne responds: "To this lively sentiment I ascribe the ineffable

¹⁸ Elizabeth Gross, "The Body of Signification," *Abjection, Melancholia and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*, ed. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), 86.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Gross, "The Body of Signification," 87. Gross thinks that one problem with Kristeva is that "there can be no specifically female writing, no female text, but only texts about women or evoking a lost, renounced femininity and maternity" (101). Though I have used Kristeva's notion of the abject in this paper, like Gross, I am concerned about Kristeva's association of the unclean, marginal, and disruptive with the feminine, and about Kristeva's lack of positive solutions for female subjects. Kristeva's abject is useful for describing what happens in West's novel, but ultimately she does not offer a resolution to the difficulty of female identity.

delight his presence excites, and the refined transport which I feel at all his observant assiduous attentions" (II: 41). In other words, indulging in emotions, in the excitement of sexual passions, in sensuality, are pleasures forbidden under the Law of the Father. In West's configuration, this defiance of patriarchal authority regarding "extreme sensibility" or propensity for self-fulfillment, albeit indulgent, leads to matrimonial discord. These inclinations are perceived to be foolish and melodramatic, and must be restrained or repressed in order for the marriage to work.

The father makes clear the set of regulations and prohibitions necessary for the functioning of the patriarchal family. Marianne must be self-effacing, and place her husband's needs before hers at all times. He tells her:

There is no part of the female character dearer to us men, than the idea that you are the soothers of our inquietudes, the solacers of our sorrow, the sympathizing friends to whom we may at all times retire for comfort, in every distress. (II: 43)

In Kristeva's terms, the abject must be purified from narcissism, must learn to repress its drives.⁴⁰ Marianne's desires have no legitimate place in her marital relationship. The father continues:

Exert the powers of your understanding, my dear child...You are commanded to prepare yourself for a spiritual world, not to languish out life in luxurious softness. (II: 44)

Couched in religious terms, the woman is ordered to deny earthly pleasures in hopes of "spiritual" ones. Yet West's teachings are different from the evangelical More's, as men and women are not expected to endure the same sacrifices. In West's world, a husband is allowed human desires, imperfections and weaknesses; a wife needs to "divert [her] attention from his failings" (II: 135):

⁴⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 12-17.

you will study your husband's temper and character, with the deepest attention; in order that you may discover the peculiar tendency of those errors and prejudices, from which the best of us are not free, that by familiarizing them to your mind, they may steal upon you in the diminished form of little imperfections. (II: 46)

West's feminine ideal must not only conquer her own desires and pleasures; she must also be angelic enough to excuse similar weaknesses in her husband.

Much of the function of the negative sister in the novel is to provide occasions for didacticism. West uses Marianne's transgressions to highlight the dangers of impropriety and to emphasize difference with the angelic ideal. When Marianne complains to her father about her husband, he tells her to accept marital difficulties as one of the "ills common to humanity" (II: 116). He advises that women should be "easily entreated" whenever there are quarrels between spouses, believing that "troubles arising from contrariety of temper and opinion, may be remedied by prudence and concession" [on the woman's part] (II: 106, 116). The qualities Marianne possesses—enthusiasm, imprudence, theatrical passions (II: 119)—are those traditionally most frequently associated with the "feminine," as opposed to restraint, wisdom, and reason which are culturally ascribed to the masculine realm. One may go so far as to say that West's ideal wife should exhibit no passion at all. She concludes that Marianne's "married life may teach ladies not to depend upon the durability of that evanescent affection which lovers feel" (II: 160).

In addition, in *A Gossip's Story* the oedipal rejection of the mother and maternal figures must be complete. It seems as if every female figure must be "ab-jected." In Marianne's case, her girlfriend and confidant incurs the jealousy and anger of her husband. In order for the couple to be successfully reconciled, the father advises his daughter against resuming the friendship:

I must, however, repeat that a wife should *retain* no connections which her husband decidedly disapproves. A prudent woman indeed will never *form* any which can give pain to a reasonable man...Female friendship, my child, is often disgraced by a ridiculous imitation. Two

romantick girls select each other...They relinquish the practice of acknowledged virtues, to indulge in a frivolous intimacy, and...they gratify a propensity for mere gossip, capricious expectations, and fantastick desires. (II: 131-2)⁴¹

In psychoanalytic terms, what Marianne's father prescribes is Freud's oedipal rejection of the mother, and a turning to the father or a substitute father figure. West would be enacting what Adrienne Rich calls matrophobia:

Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all or our mothers' bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers'; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery.⁴²

Both Rich and Kristeva suggest that the "killing" of what seems like the "other" is actually a desire to be rid of what phallogocentric culture traditionally designates as the "feminine" in woman. Hélène Cixous has demonstrated that the system of dualities prevalent in Western culture is "hierarchized," where the qualities associated with the woman and mother figure are seen as weak or undesirable in society as in examples of "activity / passivity," "sun / moon," "father / mother," "master / slave."⁴³ In the context of late eighteenth-century Britain, where woman could only be defined in relation to a male figure, that is, could only achieve subjectivity as wife, mother, or daughter, West would feel that matrophobia or the killing of the subversive, weak, or "feminine" part of oneself

⁴¹ West expresses a similar concern in *Letters to a Young Lady, in which the Duties and Characters of Women are Considered* (1806), introduction by Gina Luria, 3 vols. (New York: Garland, 1974) I: 24: "I forbear to mention the dangers which young women are exposed to from faithless confidants, indiscreet friends, artful parasites, needy dependants, and all that routine of interested servility so commonly appendant to beauty, birth, or fortune."

⁴² Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, 10th ed. (New York: Norton, 1986), 236.

⁴³ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement, "Sorties," in *The Newly Born Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 63-4.

was a necessary part of successfully becoming integrated into and accepted by a society with its predominantly male-centered values.

Indeed, in West's depiction of the ideal Louisa, there is no room for a female or maternal figure:

[Louisa] wholly confined to the duties of a daughter, her heart glowed with the purest flame of benevolence, nor could disappointment obscure, nor distress absorb the sacred radiance. (II: 59)

Unlike Marianne, Louisa's pleasures are not self-indulgent:

Her favourite amusements; her books, her needle, her musick, her garden, the society of her beloved father, and those active exertions of charity from which her limited purse could not wholly restrain her. (II: 61-2)

Since Louisa's (and Marianne's) mother has been killed off literally and metaphorically when the daughters were in their early years, and she has been with her father, there is no undesirable feminine influence in the older sister's background. Louisa dedicates herself wholly to her father, and lives by his Law. She has the full approval of Prudentia Homespun the narrator, who, though a woman, is one who has successfully suppressed the sentimentality and romantic preoccupations associated with Marianne. Though Louisa finds herself falling in love with Pelham, she represses her feelings until these are sanctioned by Mr. Dudley. In the novel, she virtually has no existence outside of the Lacanian father. As a dutiful daughter, she devotes her life to Mr. Dudley until he dies. At his deathbed, he hands her over with his blessings to Pelham who has come to appreciate Louisa's worth while she tended and prayed for her father. That the father has molded her character is evident from his praise of her:

She was my adviser, my comforter, my companion, my friend, our tastes, our habits, our desires corresponded...I know that she has sufficient greatness of soul to dignify narrow circumstances by cheerful patience. (II: 198)

Though in the eyes of conservative moralists intent on preserving the family, Louisa would be commended for her filial

obedience, in the feminist psychoanalytic terms I have been employing, she would be seen as a subject who has repressed or rejected her desires. Her "tastes," "habits," and "desires" are her father's, as he himself points out.

Twentieth-century feminist Luce Irigaray has pointed out that "our culture is based upon the exchange of women."⁴⁴ She argues that women are "commodities" and that "the economy of exchange—of desire—is man's business."⁴⁵ This observation seems particularly appropriate to the resolution of West's novel as Louisa is literally "given" by her father to Pelham, who has been assisting the Dudley family with financial advice and aid. The fact that Louisa has loved Pelham all along makes the transaction seem less mercenary and somewhat romantic, but it is still difficult to read the scene without thinking of it as an exchange of a useful commodity between men who wield power. The father, who no longer needs his nurse and companion, presents his daughter to his young friend, suggesting a patrilinear handing over of property. Even after his death, the figure of the father remains a strong influence on the couple, as Pelham arranges to have a statue of him erected on their property. Pelham explains:

We will recollect your father's precepts, and consider it as a chequered scene, from which the virtuous, well-regulated mind may derive many advantages...our remembrance shall tend to meliorate our own hearts, and our love prompts us to exercise those virtues which have glorified him, and will exalt us to equal happiness. (II: 214)

This phallic image of the father's statue watching over his descendants and his patrimony is an apt and literal rendition of the type of society and familial structure Jane West was promoting. Patriarchal teachings and the father's law abides even without a real father. For West as for Burke, the community functions best under this kind of patriarchal rule.

Finally, it is important to stress that this ideal is not "natural" but very much a cultural construction. Despite West's repeated disclaimer, I would suggest that her novels do

⁴⁴ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 170.

⁴⁵ Irigaray, *This Sex*, 177.

make use of exaggerations and extremes. In her Preface to *The Advantages of Education*, West entreats her readers not "to expect extravagance of character, or variety of incident." Instead what she says she does is to "describe life as [the inexperienced part of her own sex] are likely to find it." Similarly in the Introduction to *A Gossip's Story* West says of her first novel:

It had no splendour of language, no local description, nothing of the marvellous, or the enigmatical, no sudden elevation, and no astonishing depression. It merely spoke of human life as it is, and so simple was the story, that at the outset an attentive reader must have foreboded the catastrophe. (I: vi)

However, as I have tried to show through *A Gossip's Story*, this claim to "realism," or "human life as it is" is a false one. West does polarise her characters, because this is the only way her ideal feminine figure can be delineated. The story of the transgressive other takes up more than half the novel, and is a necessary aspect of the representation of the exemplary. Without the abject or the object of revulsion, this ideal cannot be determined or even signified. She remains a vague, unrealized figure without her counterpart. In West's novels, the threatening "other" must be created, and then exorcised and punished in order for the smooth existence of the ideal subject. Ultimately, the indeterminacy of the one without the other may point to the difficulties and virtual impossibility, for women then and now, of achieving West's feminine ideal.