

It's true that much was made of Poe's alcoholism, Byron's incest, Keats's tuberculosis, and Shelley's immoral behaviour, but somehow these romantic rebellions made male poets not only more interesting, but more male. It was rarely suggested that the two Emilys, Jane, Christina and the rest lived as they did because it was the only way they could get the time and develop the concentration to write. The amazing thing about women writers in the nineteenth century is not that there were so few of them but that there were any at all. If you think this syndrome is dead and buried, take a look at Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*. The central character is a successful woman writer, but it becomes obvious to her that she cannot write and retain the love of a good man. She chooses writing and throws an ashtray at the man, and at the end of the book she is living alone. Writers, male and female, have to be selfish just to get the time to write, but women are not trained to be selfish.

A much more extreme version of the perils of creativity is provided by the suicides of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton and the rather ghoulish attention paid to them. Female writers in the twentieth century are seen not just as eccentric and unfeminine, but as doomed. The temptation to act out the role of isolated or doomed female artist, either in one's life or through one's characters, is quite strong. Luckily, there are alternatives. When hard pressed, you can always contemplate the life of Mrs. Gaskell, Harriet Beecher Stowe or even, say, Alice Munro or Adele Wiseman or the many other female writers who seem to have been able to combine marriage, motherhood, and writing without becoming more noticeably deformed than anyone else in this culture.

However, there is some truth to the *Red Shoes* syndrome. It is more difficult for a woman writer in this society than for a male writer. But not because of any innate mysterious hormonal or spiritual differences: it is more difficult because it has been made more difficult, and the stereotypes still lurk in the wings, ready to spring fully formed from the heads of critics, both male and female, and attach themselves to any unwary character or author that wanders by. Women are still expected to be better than men, morally that is, even by women, even by some branches of the women's movement; and if you are not an angel, if you happen to have human failings, as most of us do, especially if you display any kind of strength or power, creative or otherwise, then you are not merely human, you're worse than human. You are a witch, a Medusa, a destructive, powerful, scary monster. An angel with pimples and flaws is not seen as a human being but as a devil. A character who behaves with the inconsistency that most of us display most of the time is not a believable creation but a slur on the Nature of Woman or a sermon, not on human frailty, but on the special frailer-than-frail shortcomings of all Womankind. There is still a lot of social pressure on a woman to be perfect, and also a lot of resentment of her should she approach this goal in any

but the most rigidly prescribed fashion.

I could easily illustrate by reading from my own clipping file: I could tell you about Margaret the Magician, Margaret the Medusa, Margaret the Man-eater, clawing her way to success over the corpses of many hapless men. Margaret the power-hungry Hitler, with her megalomaniac plans to take over the entire field of Canadian Literature. This woman must be stopped! All of these mythological creatures are inventions of critics; not all of them male. (No one has yet called me an angel, but Margaret the Martyr will surely not take long to appear, especially if I die young in a car accident).

It would be amusing to continue with these excerpts, but it would also be rather mean, considering the fact that some of the perpetrators are, if not in the audience, employed by this university. So instead of doing that, I will enter a simple plea; women, both as characters and as people, must be allowed their imperfections. If I create a female character, I would like to be able to show her having the emotions all human beings have — hate, envy, spite, lust, anger and fear, as well as love, compassion, tolerance, and joy — without having her pronounced a monster, a slur, or a bad example. I would also like her to be cunning, intelligent and sly, if necessary for the plot, without having her branded as a bitch goddess or a glaring instance of the deviousness of women. For a long time, men in literature have been seen as individuals, women merely as examples of a gender; perhaps it is time to take the capital W off Woman. I myself have never known an angel, a harpy, a witch or an earth mother. I've known a number of real women, not all of whom have been nicer or more noble or more long-suffering or less self-righteous and pompous than men. Increasingly it is becoming possible to write about them, though as always it remains difficult for us to separate what we see from what we have been taught to see. Who knows? Even I may judge women more harshly than I do men; after all, they were responsible for Original Sin, or that is what I learned in school.

I will end with a quote from Agnes Macphail, who was not a writer but who was very familiar with at least one literary stereotype. 'When I hear men talk about women being the angel of the home, I always, mentally at least, shrug my shoulders in doubt. I do not want to be the angel of the home. I want for myself what I want for other women: absolute equality. After that is secured, then men and women can take their turns at being angels.' I myself would rephrase that: 'Then men and women can take their turns at being human, with all the individuality and variety the term implies.'

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Fear of Flying

I disdained Wonder Woman, Juno,
Aphrodite
tracking instead new constellations
Frum, Carr and Kantaroff, Callwood, Hutchinson
LaMarsh and Flora, Livesay,
Laurence, Madeline Parent,
McGibbon, Jewett, expanding universe
yet some name me Icarus still
as though the steaming spiral
were choice to be avoided
I have clenched the sun in my teeth
apprentice phoenix
singe-edged but flying

Don't you remember schoolroom
studies of the lowly ant?
'the perfect social colony'
'each does his own task'
'Industrious Clean Orderly'
'If only mankind'
And didn't you aspire to be the Queen
the one with wings?
Victim perhaps, she
is allowed just one flight
before the workers eat her wings,

but to miss that . . .

Marsha Mitchell