



Representations of Femininity in American Genre Cinema

The Woman's Film, Film Noir,
and Modern Horror

David Greven



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First published in 2011 by PALGRAVE MACMILLAN® in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN: 978-0-230-11251-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Greven, David.

Representations of femininity in American genre cinema : the woman's film, film noir, and modern horror / by David Greven.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Femininity in motion pictures. 2. Women in motion pictures. 3. Motion pictures—United States. I. Title.

PN1995.9.W6G745 2011

791.43'6522—dc22

2010037447

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Scribe Inc.

First edition: April 2011

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

*For my mother, Florence; my aunts, Chantal,
Che-Che, Jannah, and Nan; and in loving memory
of my grandmother, Marie Therese Moise*

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Acknowledgments

Portions of the manuscript have been previously published in article form. The author gratefully acknowledges *Refractory: a Journal of Entertainment Media* for permission to reprint “Medusa in the Mirror: The Split World of Brian De Palma’s *Carrie*,” originally published in the issue “Double Trouble: Special Issue on Split and Double Screens,” Volume 14, 2008; and *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* (no. 52, Summer 2010), for permission to reprint “Demeter and Persephone in Space: Transformation, Femininity, and Myth in the *Alien* Films.” The URL for the original *Jump Cut* essay is <http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/GrevenAliens/index.html>. I warmly thank the editors and anonymous readers at both journals for their incisive guidance and encouragement.

With equal warmth, I thank Mike Black and Black Summers Productions for kindly supplying me with a pre-DVD-release copy of Black’s 2009 documentary *Queer Icon: The Cult of Bette Davis*. My thanks also to my friend Corinne Ondine Pache for her insights into the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. And, as ever and in all ways, to Alex Beecroft.

INTRODUCTION

Femininity and Film Genres

A woman creeps down the stairs. Unkempt, unattractively attired, hair and eyebrows consuming her face, her eyes squirming in panic, she is trapped in her own body, volatile, vulnerable. Her mother, a cold, angry woman, tells her that the kind, gentle, quiet man in their palatial living room is a psychiatrist. “A nervous breakdown? Is *that* what you’re trying to achieve?” Mother sharply asks. The psychiatrist follows the woman upstairs, into her private lair, her room filled with hidden books and secret vices. “Introverted, Doctor?” Charlotte Vale asks; she’s on to Dr. Jaquith’s psychiatric game. But beneath her spiky sarcasm lies the longing for a cure. “Dr. Jaquith, can you help me?” she asks tearfully. His response, given the typical interpretation of *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942) throughout the years as a film in which a male psychiatrist rescues an unhappy woman, is an interesting one: “*You don’t need my help.*” We will return to this moment.

Bette Davis plays Charlotte Vale, and one suspects that what drew Davis to the role were the opportunities it gave her to perform a feat at which she excelled: onscreen transformation from one physical and emotional state into another. While several Davis films showcase her singular talent for such onscreen transformations, they are far from a unique event in the genre of the woman’s film, a prominent Hollywood genre for three decades, from the 1930s to the 1960s. Women frequently transform, either at key points in or over the course of cinematic narrative, sometimes on a physical level, sometimes in more abstract ways, as if in homage to Shakespeare’s Cleopatra and her “infinite variety.” The genre of the musical makes such transformations especially visible, with female stars careening through a dizzying series of costume and hairstyle changes. But transformations occur in dramatic narratives as well, as characters as well as performers transmogrify into apparently distinct new creations. Especially vivid examples include Bette Davis in *Now, Voyager*, Joan Crawford in *A Woman’s Face*, and the heroines of Hitchcock films, in particular *Vertigo* and

Marnie. Subtler physical transformations also frequently occur: compare Julie Marsden wearing a red dress at the Olympus Ball to her apology on bent knee in a white dress in *Jezebel*; the newly married second Mrs. De Winter's appearance in *Rebecca* to the look she sports at the climactic trial, to say nothing of her spectacular and disastrous appearance in a De Winter ancestor's gown, once worn by the titular character as well; Olivia de Havilland's hairstyles before and after her realization of her father's contempt for her and her mercenary suitor's duplicity in *The Heiress*. These physical transformations reflect shifts in their characters' emotional lives. While physical transformation is the most potent, because most apparent, form of change in film, physical change usually registers and complements more significant emotional transformations. Change can also occur on an abstract level with eventual somatic and emotional effects. Many characters strive for a change in their class status and achieve it over the course of the narrative: the social-climbing women in *Imitation of Life*, *Mildred Pierce*, *Flamingo Road*, *Payment on Demand*, and other films transform themselves into wealthier, more upwardly mobile versions of themselves, social transformations also conveyed through shifts in appearance and affect.

Debates over what constitutes the woman's film, what distinguishes it from melodrama and other genres, what its goals were, and who composed its audience continue to generate contributions and remain controversial. I will address these debates and offer my own understanding of them and the genre in [Chapter 2](#); for now, let me establish that the popularity of the woman's film genre in the sound film extends from the 1930s to the early 1960s, after which it appears to become a moribund genre. I argue, however, that the woman's film genre does not die out but rather goes underground and transforms into the female-centered form of modern horror, in which the trope of female transformation not only persists but really flourishes.

In my view, modern horror, a genre I attempt to define as such in [Chapter 5](#), begins with Hitchcock's 1960 *Psycho* and reaches a seeming terminus point in the early 1990s. *The Silence of the Lambs*, from 1991, is, in many ways, the last horror film to locate its central drama in a woman's psychosexual development into adult femininity. Ironically, the horror genre would achieve its greatest cultural legitimation just as it began to ebb as a form that *sought* this legitimation: *The Silence of the Lambs* won several Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Actor, Actress, Adapted Screenplay, and Director. After *Silence*, horror would become increasingly ironic, deconstructive, parodistic, metatextual, or otherwise postmodern, as Wes Craven's final *Nightmare on Elm Street* film (about the filming of a *Nightmare on Elm Street* film) and *Scream* films would exemplify. Horror films of the first decade of the twenty-first century, entering a post-post-modern phase, have resolutely eschewed this parodistic horror, but they have not gone back to the female-narrative roots of horror—far from it. The torture

porn films of the twenty-first century, exemplified by *Saw* and *Hostel*, have been resolutely masculinist in their gendered attitudes, while expending most of their energies on and drawing most of their fascination from their spectacles of grandiose, unspeakable sadism and the varieties of bodily dismemberment. Modern horror has, however, made something of a resurgence in the first decade of the twenty-first century with the rise of remakes of modern horror classics by such self-assertive *auteurs* as Rob Zombie. This resurgence, for the most part, has meant more for an exploration of male psychosexual tensions than it has for femininity, as I discuss in the last chapter, even with the appearance of equal-opportunity female-mayhem works such as *The Descent* (2005).

Another important theme in the woman's film, linked to or perhaps allegorical of transformation, carries over into modern horror and deepens in significance: female vengeance, figured in the phallic, retributive woman, whom I call, consciously evoking classical mythology, the Fury. Though related or analogous to the femme fatale, the Fury, as I will explain, is distinct from this film-noir icon. A problematic and exciting figure of female change, the Fury emerges in classical Hollywood fusions of the woman's film and film noir and allegorizes the dark potentialities of femininity in genre film.

Transforming Genre

The sustained ambivalence of transformation in the classical Hollywood woman's film continues to inform the woman's films made during the decline of the great studio era (*Splendor in the Grass* [1961], *Marnie* [1964]), and afterward. Female-centered modern horror films (*Carrie* [1976], *The Silence of the Lambs*, the numerous *Terminator* and *Alien* films, both of which fuse the genres of horror and science fiction, the latter in particular) function as what I call, reworking the paradigms of Robert B. Ray, *concealed woman's films*. Such movies do the work of the classical women's films under a different genre heading that also allows them to attract wider audiences, namely the heterosexual male viewers presumed to be fundamentally allergic to the woman's film. There are other genre reworkings of the woman's film, such as the self-conscious and self-referential throwbacks to melodrama (*Thelma and Louise* [1991], Todd Haynes's *Far from Heaven* [2002], Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain*, a male melodrama) or films such as *The Brave One* (2007) that splice together the conventions of distinct genres to produce a hybridic product. Though the woman's film ostensibly faded into oblivion in the 1960s, its enduring relevance as a template for popular filmmaking attests to its sustained power as a genre. Moreover, the fluidity with which the woman's film form can be reshaped into different genre projects confirms its status as one of the most influential of classical Hollywood genres.

A prime example of a modern horror film that picks up where the woman's film leaves off, Brian De Palma's *Carrie* takes the theme of transformation to dizzying heights. It's a classic woman's film in violent color that demands empathy for its heroine and places the viewer in the female subject position. It reverses the trajectory of Bette Davis's Oscar-winning role in the 1938 Old South melodrama *Jezebel* (often seen as a sop to Davis for having lost out on the lead role in the 1939 epic *Gone with the Wind*, but a significant film in its own right) in which headstrong, brash Julie Marsden goes from a dark red dress that signifies sin to a white dress that signifies penitence and purity, even as De Palma's film denatures the very logic of these signs. The dress Carrie wears to the prom is pink, but Carrie's religious fundamentalist mother recognizes its true symbolic color. ("Red. I might have known it would be red," she imprecates.) When that pink dress transforms into a literally blood-red one, it signifies a transition from innocence to experience and to evil. No longer a split self that wars against its own potentialities, the red Carrie fuses the human and the otherworldly, woman and witch. A Fury, she purges the decadent world of its cruelties and barbaric energies, yet her transformation also signals—as it does for Catharine Sloper in *The Heiress*—a devolution into cold, hard inhumanity, the absence of love, which can carry with it a moral purposefulness, a retributive power, but at a terrible cost, the loss of her soul. As with the morally conscientious heroine Gillian in De Palma's *The Fury* (1978), when Carrie accesses the full, terrifying range of her powers at the climax and unleashes them upon the promgoers who have mocked her, she not only acts as a moral agent of retribution but also forfeits any last shred of her own humanity. *Carrie* takes *Jezebel's* tropes to dizzying extremes. Julie's scandalous red dress at the ball that creates such havoc—disrupting the ball and Julie's hopes for marriage—finds an analog in Carrie's blood-drenched prom dress, just as the white dress Julie penitently puts on to appease her fiancé Press (Henry Fonda) anticipates the soft blue-green, Virgin Mary robe Carrie dons in the denouement, after an apparently purifying bath that means to cleanse her soul as well as bloodstains. Yet *Carrie* takes *Jezebel's* white dress of humility to an altogether different, denatured level: even after putting on her virginal robe after her bath, Carrie transforms once again into a Fury, killing her monstrous mother, on her own campaign to destroy Carrie.

These concealed women's films run riot with the implicit allegories of the classical women's films, turning their ambiguities into fully fledged allegorical cinematic structures. If the *Alien* series starring Sigourney Weaver in her indelible performances as Lieutenant Ellen Ripley together portray the ultimate cinematic project of transformation, as Ripley evolves from a military officer (*Alien*) to an ambiguous outsider figure trying to find a cathartic freedom from trauma (*Aliens*) to the threat of woman herself (*Alien 3*) to the post-human, hybrid Other (*Alien Resurrection*), they revolve around a creature that

embodies transformation. The titular Alien functions as the symbol for Ripley's *own* transmogrifications, embodying in grotesque and wondrous flesh her own powers of change, signifying, in its mutations from egg-laying, face-hugging squid to vicious phallic fetus to fully formed, exotic machine-insect-monster, the series' investments in woman as site of astonishing metamorphosis.

Gay Men and Genre Women

In my view, one of the least theorized and most powerful aspects of the genres of the woman's film, especially in its cultural afterlife, is its resonance for gay male viewers, who have historically appropriated the genre. By exploring the gay male identification with women's film narratives and characters, I track the genealogy of gay male fandom that extends from the woman's film to horror. Cross-gender identification in genre film has been taken up by other critics, most notably by Gaylyn Studlar in her treatment of the male viewer's response to Marlene Dietrich films and Carol Clover in her famous theory of the "Final Girl" of horror with whom male spectators identify, although sexual difference also allows them to disavow this identification. Yet very little work has been done on the gay or queer male viewer's identification with cinematic heroines.

In terms of the woman's film, Robin Wood and Andrew Britton have most notably explored gay appropriations of the genre, and critics such as Richard Dyer, Alexander Doty, and Brett Farmer have explored this relation in classical Hollywood more generally. The number of such treatments by other critics, however, is quite limited, and for the horror genre more limited still. As an example of these limitations, in the many, many discussions of the controversies of *The Silence of the Lambs*—centering on the apparently homophobic characterization of the serial killer Jame Gumb (Ted Levine)—I have yet to come across a treatment of the film that discusses gay male identification with its heroine, Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster). Critics assume that the only character with whom gay male audiences would identify would be the one typed as a queer male. If gay males identify with Clarice Starling, the problems with the film's representation of queer masculinity do not disappear, but they do take on a different character.

The case I make in this book is that women characters, even in misogynistic and homophobic narratives, have had an underexplored political value as allegories for gay male experience, even if, as such, they have been more frustrating for analogous feminist appropriation. With all of this appropriation has come opprobrium, namely in the form of the punitive function of the action heroine who destroys nonnormative masculinity, in films as diverse as *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Alien Resurrection*, and the 2009 remake of *Friday the 13th*, as I show in the last chapter. Disentangling radicalism from reaction in these appropriations

and the symbolic meanings of these narratives is one of the defining aims of this study. Broadly speaking, my goal is to offer a kind of genealogy of gay male identification with Hollywood women, from melodrama to horror. I want to be clear, however, about what I am not attempting or proposing to undertake here. Current film studies practice would appear to privilege context over text, although there are, of course, exceptions. This book does not understand itself as a work in the field of reception studies or some other kind of historical study, though I do attempt to make use of such studies and to ground my findings in accounts of genre film. Proceeding from a psychoanalytic basis as well as a myth-focused one, this book is a reverie, a series of meditations on some arresting, recurring figures of symbolic femininity.

***Chapter 1: Freud and the Death-Mother:
Freud, the Woman's Film, and Modern Horror***

Freud often confessed to being bewildered by the female experience of the Oedipus complex, which in no way prevented him from proceeding to explain feminine sexual development through oedipal paradigms. Whatever his failures of vision and empathy, Freud's work sheds a certain amount of light on the ways that feminine identity is constructed by the social order. But Freud's female Oedipus complex stands in sharp contrast to a fuller model of female sexual development. Offering an alternative to the Oedipus complex for this endeavor, I propose a different mythological precedent and, with it, psychosexual logic: the myth of Demeter and Persephone, a narrative of female sexual development that incorporates both the daughter's and, perhaps especially, the mother's experience, which Freud, with some important exceptions, leaves largely underexplored. I provide a close reading of Freud's essay "The Theme of the Three Caskets," his most explicit meditation on maternal themes. From there, I explore the impact that Freud's theories have had on the Hitchcock film, the woman's film, and this genre's later manifestations in modern film horror.

Chapter 2: Transformations of the Woman's Film: Or Feminine Myths

Key texts in the woman's film genre, principally *Now, Voyager* and *Imitation of Life* (in both the 1934 and the 1959 versions), simultaneously thematize the woman's transformation and a central conflict in the mother-daughter relationship. Drawing parallels between these narratives and the Homeric myth of Demeter and Persephone, I explore the relationship between transformation, usually occurring on a physical as well as emotional level, and mother-daughter bonds, and the interest that male directors have had in these narratives of female sexual development. An equally important figure emerges in women's films, especially those that cross-fertilize with film noir, such as *Possessed* and *Flamingo*

Road: the phallic, avenging woman, a Fury who enacts retributive justice on the males who have wronged her. I also discuss competing ways in which the woman's film has been theorized and establish my own critical position that the genre is multigeneric and has as much symbolic value for gay male as it does for female audiences.

Chapter 3: Medusa in the Mirror: Brian De Palma's Carrie

Based on Stephen King's novel but remarkably different from it in tone and effect, De Palma's *Carrie* unfolds like a fusion of the Cinderella fairy tale, the woman's film melodrama, Grand Guignol theater, and Greek mythology and tragedy. As the film obsessively thematizes splitting in myriad forms, De Palma's intertextual engagement with the cinema of Alfred Hitchcock reaches an especially feverish and eloquent early height. *Carrie's* most potent theme, one that will be the chief focus of this chapter, is the violent splitting of the mother-daughter relationship in patriarchy. The film deploys Freudian theories of the female Oedipus complex while unsettling the oedipal narrative into which Freud inserted female psychosexual development. The film demands—by manifesting—a different mythic narrative of feminine identity and power from the Freudian oedipal one, one that nods toward the alternative archetypal narrative of the myth of Demeter and Persephone.

Chapter 4: Demeter and Persephone in Space: Transformation, Femininity, and Myth in the Alien Films

One of the defining features of the woman's film is the theme of transformation, which happens on both physical and emotional levels. Female transformation functions, in part, as a strategy for the avoidance of male domination and marriage, even as it solicits both. Transformation in the *Alien* films serves these purposes and a different one altogether. The transformations of the heroine of the four films, Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver), revise the marriage plot of the woman's film. But ultimately Ripley's transformations are their own end. The true drama of the *Alien* films is the endless permeability and transformability of the heroine. Seen in this light, the Aliens themselves serve, in their own endless abilities to transform, as an allegory of the heroine's own metamorphoses. The four films constitute an extraordinarily rich narrative of femininity—indeed, together they are a female epic in which the heroine comes to know her own capacities, decides to take action in the face of enemy threat, arms herself, faces the enemy, dies to save humanity, and merges with the Alien.

**Chapter 5: *The Finalizing Woman:
Horror, Femininity, and Queer Monsters***

Carol J. Clover's theory of the "Final Girl" has been particularly influential. As Clover theorizes it, the Final Girl—the heroine who escapes the mass killings of the horror film monster, confronts him at the climax, and remains alive at the end of the film, having either eluded or annihilated him—is an identificatory figure for the masochistic male spectator, who can both experience her suffering and disavow any connection to it. In this chapter, I offer a queer theory reading of the horror film that both intersects with and clashes against Clover's feminist argument, provoking broader questions of gender and identification. Specifically, I am interested in what a possible "clash" between these approaches reveals not only about the expectations of divergent audiences but also about the goals and sensibilities of related and also distinct methodologies. Though a positively valued figure in film studies as well as popular culture, the Final Girl is also a prohibitive, disciplinary figure. The Final Girl battles against a monstrous male whose monstrosity lies not in his sexual threat to the heroine—though there is always a threat of physical violence—but in his lack of a functional sexuality of any kind. It is precisely in the heroine's climactic confrontation with a sexually nonnormative male that feminist and queer issues intersect and diverge in provocative ways. Both the Final Girl and the monstrous male she faces off against at the climax engage in a struggle over modes of gendered and sexual power and identity as much as life and death. The chief tension that emerges, finally, for the queer viewer is again one of identification: are we the Final Girl or the monster she destroys? In the "Coda" to the book, I discuss Neil Jordan's 2007 film *The Brave One*. Though commonly read as a throwback to the 1970s vigilante and rape-revenge film genres, *The Brave One* is, I argue, an exemplary woman's film, one that allows us to see that the themes and conflicts of the woman's film endure in genre-hybridic form.

PART I

Freud and Classical Hollywood

CHAPTER 1

Freud and the Death-Mother

Freud, the Woman's Film, and Modern Horror

As Film Studies has amply demonstrated, Freudian theory exerted a profound influence over the content and thematic preoccupations of classical Hollywood. In this chapter, I make the case that narratives of femininity in classical myth, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Hollywood film are analogous mythologies, abstract versions of the social and cultural conditions that produce gender and sexual identities, which in turn shape these productions. Like classical myth—to which I turn in the next chapter—Freud's work engages in misogynistic, constrictive constructions of femininity. I believe that, as Jonathan Dollimore has astutely encouraged us to do, we should read Freud allegorically.¹ Read in this manner, Freud's accounts of femininity can, at times, have a genuine insight and resonance. Whether or not one finds Freud insightful on matters of femininity, what is undeniable is the correspondence between his views of women's situation and female strategies to circumvent it and those propounded in Hollywood film.

If we take into consideration the major preoccupations of Freud's treatment of femininity—the girl who knows she wants power “in a flash,” resisting her gendered destiny as she defies the logic of patriarchy; the daughter's simultaneous love for and rage against her mother, as well as the terror of the loss of the bond with her; the lifelessness, or death-in-life-ness, of the woman's experience of patriarchy; and the fusion of eros and death that inheres in constructions of normative sexuality—we can understand that his theories have had both a direct and an indirect impact on cinematic genres that focus on female sexuality, the woman's film and modern horror in particular. Classical woman's films such as *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942), *Possessed* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1947), *Whirlpool* (Otto Preminger, 1947), *The Snake Pit* (Anatole Litvak, 1948), *The Three Faces of Eve* (Nunnally Johnson, 1957), and others most explicitly

reveal the presence of Freud. But his influence extends to other notable films as well, whose psychoanalytic underpinnings are less explicitly depicted yet still palpable: *The Letter* (William Wyler, 1940), *The Locket* (John Brahm, 1946), *Flamingo Road* (Michael Curtiz, 1949), *Beyond the Forest* (King Vidor, 1949), *The Furies* (Anthony Mann, 1950), *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1954). These films all feature women whose frenzy for power, at least over their own destinies, lead them to reenact the pivotal battles for agency waged valiantly by the oedipal girl of Freudian theory. Women whose resistance to the limitations of gender identity become the chief source of narrative drama resurface in the modern horror film, which features female characters who defy the strictures of the gendered order: *Sisters* (Brian De Palma, 1973), *Rabid* (David Cronenberg, 1977), *The Fury* (Brian De Palma, 1978), *Alien* and its sequels, and the Final Girl of slasher horror. As I will show in subsequent chapters, the phallic heroine of the woman's film noir, in her destruction of nonnormative male figures (*Flamingo Road* is exemplary in this regard), prefigures the Final Girl whose destruction of the monster has both a feminist and a surprisingly reactionary function. A more obvious horror intertext, the Hitchcock thriller, both intersects with the genre of the woman's film and often locates its emotional core within the struggles of the heroine. Freud is everywhere present in Hitchcockian schemas. Phallic women, narcissistic women, fetishism, male desire for the ideal, the fusion of sex and death, misogyny as the inevitable result of male castration anxiety—all of these Freudian themes manifest themselves in the Hitchcock film. As Richard Allen argues in his 2007 book, *Hitchcock's Romantic Irony*, Hitchcock is the Freudian filmmaker *par excellence*.

Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) has long been seen as the most crucial film to modern horror, both for its then shockingly explicit, Production Code-defying violence and risqué sexuality and for its foregrounding of familial themes, all of which modern horror spectacularly takes up. But I argue that one of the most influential aspects of the film is the woman's anxious flight both from and toward "order," which leads to a terrifying confrontation with "Mother." The heroine's journey here corresponds to the major themes of the woman's film: the heroine's ambivalence over both marriage and mother. The feminine aspects of *Psycho* have been overshadowed by the much more obvious dynamic of the relationship between Norman Bates and his mother, but the film's complex representation of femininity is crucial to *Psycho*'s innovative design and its revision of the woman's film genre, which it transforms into horror. Modern horror film, in its female-centered form, flows from the fusion of the classical Hollywood woman's film and the Hitchcock film that *Psycho* represents, comes to mature life in the New Hollywood of the 1970s, and more or less reaches its peak in the early 1990s with *The Silence of the Lambs*. Modern horror repurposes defunct Hollywood genres while serving as a repository of unresolved anxieties within

those genres, and gives contemporary expression to ongoing cultural conflicts over gender, sexuality, and the family. As such, it sustains the preoccupations of Freudian theories of femininity as well as their difficulty and force. I discuss *Rebecca* in the next chapter and *Vertigo* later in this chapter.

Janet Walker points out that though Freud himself was deeply skeptical about the cinema, claiming in a letter to Karl Abraham that “satisfactory plastic representation of our abstractions” is not possible, a number of film plots directly engage with psychoanalysis and the figure of the psychiatrist. She also notes, “The reciprocity between psychiatry and the institution of marriage . . . may also be observed transposed to narrative form” in several classical Hollywood films, “the doctor-patient relationship representing a central vehicle for this collusion.”² While I certainly take Walker’s point about the reciprocal traditionalism within both Freud and Hollywood film, I do believe resistant elements of both can be found and remain resonant. American psychiatry often blunted, distorted, and generally made more palatable Freud’s darker propositions, such as the death drive, as it transformed his more nuanced and complex arguments, such as his theory of male homosexuality, into bluntly pathologizing programs. Similarly, his admittedly frustrating but occasionally radical treatments of femininity were shoehorned into conformist gendered standards, used as another means of rendering women powerless. While Hollywood, like Freud, did, indeed, often render women powerless, it also frequently gave vent to their desire for power. At times it also eloquently allowed women and other oppressed groups an opportunity to grieve. The inconsistencies in both Freud and Hollywood emerge as opportunities for us to find points of identification within both systems, should we wish to do so.

The Gendered Logic of the Woman’s Film and Modern Horror

In her book *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Barbara Creed argues that the primary fear at the core of the horror film genre is that the subject will be reengulfed by the terrifying figure of the archaic mother, whose mawlike threat hovers around the cultural narratives—such as Freudian psychoanalysis and Hollywood film—that repress her presence. Exemplary films in this regard include *The Exorcist*, *Carrie*, and *Alien* and its sequels. While in dialogue with Creed’s theory, my views of horror texts and the fears that undergird them are distinct from hers. While a palpable panic over strong maternal figures does indeed characterize modern horror, an equally urgent desire for *return* to the mother also informs the genre; indeed, this desire is so ardent that it may even supersede the fear of reabsorption. The horror film inherits the woman’s film’s anxieties over and conflictual wishes for return to the mother, anxieties and wishes inextricably bound up with the regimes of patriarchal defenses against such a return to origins.

The Homeric myth of Demeter and Persephone, about the abduction and rape of the maiden goddess Persephone by Hades, the king of the underworld, and the ensuing world-shattering grief of Demeter, Persephone's mother and the goddess of the seasons, grain, and the harvest, provides a crucial precedent for these recurring themes of the return to origins. Though this classical myth is not the only one that informs modern horror, it is matched only by the myth of Oedipus—influentially reimagined by Freud as a traumatic blueprint for the modern family—as a horror touchstone.

The Demeter-Persephone myth maintains a difficult relationship to other classical texts. On the one hand, it counterbalances the masculinist biases of classical literature and its proliferation of negative, phobic images of femininity, images that endure within both the woman's film and modern horror. On the other hand, the myth also maintains an ambivalent attitude toward femininity and maternity; it cannot simply be appropriated as a positive myth of mother-daughter bonds or of the mother's role within and attitudes toward culture. The ambivalence that the myth extends toward male-female sexual relationships, however, *is* more appropriable as a precedent for resistance against regimes of compulsory heterosexuality, which will become more relevant as this argument develops.

Homer's myth evinces a powerful desire for return to the mother that is coterminous with the violent rupture of mother-daughter bonds; horror film manifests simultaneous resistance to and longing for maternal union. Like the Homeric myth, horror film treats heterosexual union as a bond forged in hell, the result of violence, domination, and subjugation. The myth's depiction of the ravishment of defenseless femininity by a dark, oppressive male figure informs the gothic genre, which in turn informs the woman's film. All of these precedents then inform horror. Like the Homeric myth, both the woman's film and modern horror give vent to maternal grief as well as rage. And like the Homeric myth, both genres present us with daughter figures who ambivalently confront relationships with both mother and suitor. Trapped within constrictive bonds they wish both to escape and to sustain, these endangered and defiant daughters negotiate an unwieldy terrain of shifting desires, pressures, and destinies, moving toward as they retreat from both mother and matrimony. Given the importance of the myth's themes to modern horror, it is especially striking that it goes unmentioned in Creed's work; recovering it for consideration will be one of the defining features of this study.

Modern horror submits the anxieties circulating in the woman's film—principally the simultaneous fear of and longing for the mother, and the simultaneous fear of and desire for the suitor-lover-husband—to particularly baroque extremes. This is not to suggest that a violent dimension to these anxieties does not emerge at times in the woman's film (the figure of the Fury attests to this

violence, as does, on occasion, the force with which transformation occurs). Horror, however, has a penchant for literalizing the abstract fears registered in other forms. As Creed's work evinces, Freudian theory provides a key interpretive framework for horror film, even if classical psychoanalysis creates as many problems for as it provides insights into questions of gender and sexuality. For Creed, Freud obscures the importance of the archaic mother, focusing instead on the phallic and oedipal mothers of the later stages of psychosexual development. I place different emphases in my treatment of Freud; rather than seeing Freud as actively repressing the power of the maternal, I see a great deal of his work as symptomatic of the same ineluctable return to origins as can be found in genres such as horror film.

Inspired by the advice Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offered in her 1997 essay, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," I argue that Freud should be read reparatively.³ Through a reparative reading of Freud, I show that his work verges always on direct confrontation with the myth of Demeter and Persephone, verges on offering a theory of the myth that would provide the logical feminine complement to the Oedipus myth and Freud's famous theory of it. His refusal to engage with it directly is the token of repression against an awareness of the political implications of the myth. Freud's work verges on articulating a feminist politics as it perpetuates misogynistic biases—much like the woman's film and the horror film.

Finding Persephone in an Oedipal World

By now, the Oedipus complex is a familiar cultural narrative: "You want to kill your father and marry your mother."⁴ Though the Oedipus complex is firmly rooted in male subjectivity, and most relevant in these terms, Freud insisted on theorizing female psychosexual development through the Oedipus complex.

After a great deal of consideration—of admissions of ignorance on the subject of feminine development and expressions of uncertainty over which way to proceed theoretically—Freud proposes, in his 1925 essay, "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," that the chief distinction between the male and the female Oedipus complex is this: "*Whereas in boys the Oedipus complex is destroyed by the castration complex, in girls it is made possible and led up to by the castration complex.*"⁵ It is the boy's narcissistic valuation of his own genitals that leads to the destruction of his Oedipus complex: his hate-fueled rage against his father transforms into a belief that his father—who obviously has cut off the *mother's* penis—can do the same thing to him. If the father can cut off the penis of a being infinitely larger and more powerful than the boy himself, the once phallic mother now revealed as the castrated woman, imagine what the father can do to the *boy*. Castration strikes

sufficient fear in the boy that he must come up with a defense against this imminent threat. *I know*, says the boy to himself: *instead of hating my father and pitting myself against him, as a rival, I will do my best to be like him; I will identify with him. I will adopt his attitudes toward my mother and, like him, see her as an inferior being who has her specific uses. And since she belongs to him, and because I want to emulate him, I will strive to possess a different woman, one outside the family so that there won't be any chance that my formidable father will get jealous and decide to cut off my penis again.* Thereby the boy overcomes his own fear and learns from it; what he learns specifically is how to be a man like his father, to share in his power by devaluing woman and by learning how to desire properly—heterosexually, as the father does, but exogamously. The castration complex, for all of its terrors, is very valuable, for it shakes patriarchal sense into the boy. Not every reader hears the irony in all of this, but I believe it is very much present in Freud's account of male development: normative male development has its sources in hate, rage, and terror, as Leo Bersani has persuasively argued, and its direction is plotted by identification with the oppressor and the adoption of his misogynistic ethos.⁶

Freud argues that the mother is the original, preoedipal object of desire for both boys and girls. But while boys retain the mother as object as they undergo the Oedipus complex, girls do not, their fathers now taking the mother's place. Freud considers this process a source of theoretical consternation, something that requires careful unpacking on his part. He pointedly asks, "How does it happen that girls abandon it [the mother object] and instead take their father as object?"⁷ Yet what does not seem to occur to Freud is that the shifts in gender of the female Oedipus complex might also demand a shift in mythological contexts.

Freud frequently confessed to being bewildered by the female experience of the Oedipus complex, which, of course, in no way prevented him from proceeding to explain feminine sexual development through oedipal paradigms. Most interestingly, Freud even rejected the "Electra Complex," which might have appeared a suitably complementary approach to his masculine-focused oedipal theory.⁸ In persisting in forcing femininity into oedipal paradigms, Freud revealed more about his own obsessive need to support his discoveries than he did about femininity. Yet this is not to say that Freud revealed little or nothing about female sexuality or the ways that feminine identity is constructed by the social order. However deep his limitations on the subject of femininity, Freud does illuminate the misogynistic attitudes of patriarchy and the impossible demands it makes on girls and women. But even though it remains of interest, Freud's theory of a female Oedipus complex stands in sharp contrast to a fuller, more comprehensive, more acutely sensitive model of female sexual development. Offering an alternative to the Oedipus complex for this endeavor,

I propose a different mythological precedent and, with it, a different psychosexual logic. If Freud drew upon one of the most traumatic of Greek tragedies to construct his theory of the Oedipus complex, largely directed at males but made applicable to females as well, he might have considered another myth of much more obvious relevance to femininity: the myth of Demeter and Persephone, which is a different, equally traumatic, but more relevant narrative of female sexual development, one that incorporates both the daughter's and, perhaps especially, the mother's experience, which Freud, with some important exceptions, leaves largely underexplored. By reconsidering Freudian thought in the light of the Demeter-Persephone myth, I will demonstrate the relevance of what I term the Persephone complex to understanding feminine sexual identity, as well as psychoanalytic thought and representation. The Persephone complex, unnamed but always unfolding, haunts and undermines the Oedipus complex.⁹

Nancy Chodorow argues that one of the vexations of Freud is that he is deeply insightful on masculinity, troubled and troubling on femininity.¹⁰ In her famous study, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Chodorow, a sensitive reader of Freud as well as a stern critic of his biases, writes that one of the limitations in Freud's treatment of femininity is his "definitional assumption about what constitutes female sexuality—that it is oriented to men, passive, and vaginal. This definition remains phallogentric . . . These assumptions about the primacy of maleness distort the Freudian view of gender and female psychological life, especially by downplaying anything associated with motherhood and refusing to recognize that desires to be a mother can develop other than as conversion of penis envy and a girl's desire to be masculine . . . Freud's assumption that women's function is to have babies becomes subsumed under his view that femininity has to do only with sexual orientation and mode and the wish to be masculine."¹¹ Nothing in the treatment of Freud I offer in this chapter disputes Chodorow's critique. I do, however, need to establish that the view of active agency as phallic and therefore "masculine" is hardly Freud's alone. Indeed, agency in our culture is so tinged with masculine privilege as well as conformity to a masculinist standard—typified by the "man on the make" Jacksonian standards of antebellum America still so influential—that when an individual of any gender takes decisive action, he or she is immediately more "manly." Nathaniel Hawthorne compares the courageous Hester Prynne, the heroine of *The Scarlet Letter*, to "manlike" Queen Elizabeth. Jacques Lacan's symbol of power in our culture is the phallus, an abstracted form of the penis. To demonstrate her allegiance to the patriarchal order from which her internalized misogyny stems, Margaret White in Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976) wields an immense butcher knife over her seemingly helpless daughter's writhing, panicked body; not helpless at all, her daughter, flexing her telekinetic powers, psychically hurls an array of phallic kitchen utensils into her mother's body.

Judd Nelson's stoner rebel chastises Molly Ringwald's prissy rich girl in John Hughes's teen-angst classic *The Breakfast Club* (1985) for "not having the balls" to rise above class distinctions. The action-heroine genre, ranging from *Aliens* to *Terminator* to *Salt* (2010) and most other films starring Angelina Jolie, turns fetishism into feature films, exuding an intense fascination with the woman's phallic gun. These random examples evince a larger cultural understanding of power as somehow related to male genitalia. However constrictive and limited such associations are for any person in culture, it is nevertheless an inescapable experiential and social reality that access to agency occurs through fundamentally masculinist gendered paradigms.

Reading Freud reparatively does not mean that we should read him indulgently, that we should exculpate him for his deep lapses. Rather, a reparative reading of Freud, as I offer here, should allow us to understand the relevance of his theories to a culture hinged on its own unhinging misogyny and homophobia. To demonstrate my understanding of Freud's theory as potentially helpful for the theorization of a longing to return to mother that is concomitant with the dread of this return, I will now discuss Freud's essay, "The Theme of the Three Caskets." Here, Freud discusses the intricately connected relationships among the primal, archaic, life-giving mother; the matrimonial woman; and the mother who brings death to the subject, a figure which I call the Death-Mother. I return to the classical precedents for the woman's film in [Chapter 2](#).

Before Oedipus

In his 1931 essay, "Female Sexuality," Freud turns his attention to the importance of the girl's preoedipal attachment to her mother. Freud observes that while his female analysands were able to hold onto the very dim memories of their early, oedipal attachment to their fathers, the preoedipal, and far more significant, attachment to their mothers had "succumbed to an especially inexorable repression." Their maternal attachment, "so grey with age and shadowy and almost impossible to revivify," had taken refuge in the more retrievable one they later had to their fathers. Freud could be describing the goddess Demeter in her guise as an old crone when she wanders the earth in grief over her daughter's abduction. When it is considered how many women "remain arrested in their original attachment to their mother and never achieve a true change-over towards men," the importance of recovering preoedipal maternal attachment becomes especially urgent.¹²

Of special fascination here is Freud's formulation that all normative feminine attachment to male figures—father, husband—stems from the maternal attachment that is their model, a model of which the relationships with males are only imitative substitutes. If women model their erotic-object choice on

their fathers, and then marry men who remind them of the paternal figure, the chain of substitution began with the father, the bond with whom replaces the original and much more significant one with the mother. The husband is, therefore, a copy of a copy—a copy of the oedipal father's imitation of the preoedipal mother. Marriage, commonly considered the break with an original family structure and the development of a new one—and, most significantly for our purposes, the antithesis of the woman's bond with her parents, especially her mother—actually returns the woman to that fateful, fraught original bond with her mother. Once married, women will repeat their “bad relations with their mother” with their husband. “The husband of such a woman was meant to be the inheritor of her relation to her father, but in reality he became the inheritor of her relation to her mother.” Regression and repression inform women's marital relationships: in marriage, the woman regresses to her “affective object attachments” to her mother, which the relationship with her father was a first attempt at repressing. Women repeat in their struggles with their husbands the youthful ones they had with their mothers. It is important to note that the rivalry between mother and daughter, however, has its roots not in the Oedipus complex but in the earlier preoedipal phase, tensions only reinforced during the Oedipus complex, which occurs much later in girls than it does in boys.¹³ Throughout our discussions of the woman's film and horror, these Freudian themes will recur.

The Haunting Mother: “The Theme of the Three Caskets”

Unlike critics such as Mary Jacobus, who describes the feminist attempt at reappropriating the Demeter-Persephone myth as female “nostalgia,” I believe there is a value in imagining what might have occurred *within* classical psychoanalytic theory had Freud actually pursued this line of thought, tantalizingly suggested in some of his writing on femininity.¹⁴ Freud has often been faulted for his lack of attention to the mother's identity and experiences in his numerous accounts of psychosexual development and the “family romance.” As Diane Jonte-Pace has demonstrated in her brilliant study *Speaking the Unspeakable*, the mother is indeed present in Freud, albeit within his work's *counterthesis*, an undeveloped yet resonant set of concerns, no less present for being unspoken, that undermine his oedipal masterplot. Three clustered themes constitute this counterthesis: maternity, mortality, and immortality; Judaism and anti-Semitism; and mourning and melancholia. As holds true for each cluster, the maternal figure is associated with the uncanny, loss, and death. This unspeakable, uncanny mother manifests herself in fantasies of immortality and mothers as “instructors in death.” I argue that it is precisely this uncanny figure I call the Death-Mother that most resonantly evokes Demeter.¹⁵

The chief elaboration of this uncanny Death-Mother is Freud's extraordinary 1913 essay, "The Theme of the Three Caskets." Here, Freud first considers the significance of plays, tales, and other mythic-fable narratives in which a man must make a choice among three options, a choice that, if successful, leads to the prize of the "right" woman. He takes his first example from Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice* when Bassanio must choose from three caskets—one gold, one silver, one lead—to win the hand of the "fair and wise Portia"; the correct casket contains her portrait.¹⁶ Two suitors, who between them chose the gold and silver caskets, have already failed the test and left. Bassanio, the third suitor, correctly chooses the lead casket and therefore wins the prize, Portia, who becomes his bride.

For Freud, this tale, not unique to Shakespeare, reveals a great deal about men's relationship both to sexuality and to death. Shakespeare, Freud argues, reproduces and also inverts the schema of his source material (from the *Gesta Romanorum*, thirteenth-century Latin compendium of tales and anecdotes), in which it is a girl who must choose among three suitors: now, "a man chooses between three—caskets. If what we were concerned with were a dream, it would occur to us at once that caskets are also women, symbols of what is essential in a woman, and therefore of a woman herself—like coffers, boxes, cases, baskets, and so on." In his sweeping sleight of hand, Freud argues that Shakespeare, by inverting the gender of the one who must choose among three options, transmutes the choice into a "human" theme: "Now we see that the choice is a human one, *a man's choice among three women*."¹⁷ Freud probably also means that because this choice-making is done by a woman in one narrative and a man in another, it is therefore a universal theme, but his masculine bias is unmistakable: that a man makes the choice in Shakespeare's version makes it the universal, human version. But men may not appreciate the privileged position Freud accords them here, for what he proceeds to offer is a devastating account of male sexual desire as a desire for death.

Freud next uses another Shakespeare work, *King Lear*, as an example of the male choice between three options and its significance. At the start of the play, the vain, vulnerable old king decides how to divide up his kingdom among his three daughters, two of whom, the duplicitous Goneril and Regan, flatter him lavishly, while the third, the loyal but hardheaded Cordelia, offers him the least excessive praise. Lear "should have recognized," Freud writes, "the unassuming, speechless love of his third daughter and rewarded it, but he does not recognize it."¹⁸ The link between Cordelia and other kinds of "third" women is that "Cordelia makes herself unrecognizable, inconspicuous, like lead. She remains dumb; she 'loves and is silent.'" Freud then argues that, in psychoanalytic interpretation, "in dreams dumbness is a common representation of death."¹⁹ The "third one"—Portia, Cordelia, Cinderella, Aphrodite as the third

goddess chosen by Paris in his fateful judgment—is “a dead woman. But she may be something else as well—namely, Death itself, the Goddess of Death”: “Thanks to a displacement that is far from infrequent, the qualities that a deity imparts to men are ascribed to the deity himself. Such a displacement will surprise us least of all in relation to the Goddess of Death, since in modern versions and representations, which these stories would thus be forestalling, Death itself is nothing other than a dead man. But if the third of the sisters is the Goddess of Death, the sisters are known to us. They are the Fates, the Moerae, the Parcae or the Norns, the third of whom is Atropos, the inexorable.”²⁰

Freud makes several points here of great importance to our discussion. The idea that a woman’s silence is associated with both her appeal and her role as the embodiment of death corresponds to the importance that feminist theorists in particular have placed on women’s voices in film or lack thereof—the cinematic equivalent of the figure of Echo in the myth of Narcissus, who can only repeat back what others have first said to her.²¹ Already, too, Freud is suggesting that the physical beauty and sexual allure of such women is inextricably linked to their associations with death. If the “Eros versus Thanatos” theme is one of Freud’s most familiar, the political and aesthetic implications of Freud’s finding here are worth reconsideration. The Foucauldian critique of Freud, which would take such a deep hold in the Foucault-inflected quarters of queer theory, has always been that, in privileging sexuality as the key to the self, Freud institutionalizes sexuality as the normative, binding, inescapable logic of modern subjectivity. In other words, the focus on sexuality, with its hygienic implications for properly maintained physical and psychic health—for normative heterosexuality and a ban against any sexual proclivities that do not conform to this model—tyrannizes the body by conscripting it into a sexual subjectivity that is then installed as the “soul” imprisoned by this body. Yet Freud is never one to view sexuality as anything like a “healthy,” affirmative experience. Everything we associate with sexual desire—physical beauty, the enflaming of the corporeal senses, engorgement, vitality, fullness, plenitude—has an intimate connection to antithetical qualities, to decay, dissolution, death. This is as far from a normative campaign of sexual health as can be imagined. And herein lies, as well, the radicalism sometimes present in Freud’s universalizing rhetoric: this death-tinged eros is not some occasional perverse event but the very logic of human sexuality.

After discussing the Fates, Freud puzzles out the conundrum that in the Judgment of Paris, the third choice is Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Wouldn’t this signify that the third choice is a choice for eroticism, for sexuality, rather than for death? We still have as well the mystifying examples of Portia and Cordelia: isn’t Portia “the fairest and wisest of women,” Cordelia the one loyal daughter? The ultimate contradiction is that the man has the opportunity to make a choice; the choice is a sign of the freedom he has to make one. Yet

this choice always “falls on death.” This truly seems “a complete contradiction” since “no one chooses death.”²² At this point, the counterintuitive logic of psychoanalytic thinking proves especially useful to Freud. Evoking his own dream theory as an example, Freud reminds us, “There are motive forces in mental life which bring about replacement by the opposite in the form of what is known as reaction-formation.” The Fates were created to alert man to his mortality, the hard fact that he is not above but a part of Nature; predictably enough, man was unwilling to accept this discomfiting truth. His rebellious imagination constructed a counter myth “in which the Goddess of Death was replaced by the Goddess of Love and by what was equivalent to her in human shape. The third of the sisters was no longer Death; she was the fairest, best, most desirable and most lovable of women.” Most intriguingly of all, Freud posits that what greatly facilitated the belief in this phantasy substitution of love for death was “an ancient ambivalence . . . The Goddess of Love herself, who now took the place of the Goddess of Death, had once been identical with her. Even the Greek Aphrodite had not wholly relinquished her connection with the underworld, although she had long surrendered her chthonic role to other divine figures, to Persephone, or to the tri-form Artemis-Hecate. The Great Mother-goddesses of the oriental peoples, however, all seem to have been both creators and destroyers—both goddesses of life and fertility and goddesses of death. Thus the replacement by a wishful opposite in our theme harks back to a primaeva identity.”²³

The goddesses of the seasons, the Horae, transformed into the Moerae, the Fates. The myth of the Fates, three sisters who inexorably control man’s life and determine its end, transformed into the myth of a choice *among* three women. The illusion of choice makes it possible to stave off what we know intellectually but deny emotionally: the reality of death. “A choice is made where in reality there is obedience to a compulsion; and what is chosen is not a figure of terror, but the fairest and most desirable of women.”²⁴ In a superb reading of Shakespeare’s tragedy, Freud returns to *King Lear*, pointing out that what are most significant are not only the old king’s age and proximity to death but also his refusal to give up his love of women. His avid desire for woman’s love is the means whereby he offers his profoundly earnest resistance to death. At the end of the play, when Lear walks onto the stage carrying the dead body of Cordelia, it is really, Freud argues, Cordelia who carries Lear. “She is the Death-goddess who, like the Valkyrie in German mythology, carries the dead hero from the battlefield.” She is also “eternal wisdom,” teaching Lear to “make friends” with death.

“We might argue that what is represented here are the three inevitable relations that a man has with a woman—the woman who bears him, the woman who is his mate and the woman who destroys him; or that they are the three

forms taken by the figure of the mother in the course of a man's life—the mother herself, the beloved one who is chosen after her pattern, and lastly the Mother Earth who receives him once more.

“The old man's longing for maternal love from his wife cannot obscure an inescapable fact: what awaits him is ‘the silent Goddess of Death, [who] will take him into her arms.’”²⁵ There are many intriguing valences here; for our purposes, of special interest is the profound power of the mother, albeit in abstracted, mythic form, in direct contrast to her social powerlessness in Freud's oedipal-theory texts and the compulsory acquiescence to sex as well as to death. To address the first theme, while Freud does mention Persephone as a dual fertility and death goddess, even in this discussion specifically about mother goddesses, he leaves out any explicit mention of Demeter, who must count among the most striking examples in myth of a dual goddess who is both creator and destroyer—the Earth Mother goddess of the harvest and the seasons on the one hand, the grief-stricken death goddess who unleashes nuclear-winter wrath on the earth, on the other hand, as she mourns for her abducted, absent daughter. By focusing on “daughter” figures, such as Portia, Cordelia, Cinderella, Psyche, and Persephone, even as he discusses mother goddesses, Freud casts the daughter in the mother's role as well; he makes the daughter the mother's doppelgänger. The daughter seduces with her sexual allure, hiding the reality of the mother and her dual powers of life giving and death dealing. The desirable daughter is a kind of lure or bait for the man who follows her down the path she leads to the mother's final, silent, deathly embrace.

Freud and Film

Perhaps the Hollywood film to make most exquisite use of these Freudian images is Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), which I read, following Tania Modleski, as a treatment of male obsession with maternal desire as well as a woman's film about mother-daughter relationships.²⁶ The mother in the preoedipal phase, with her seductive power and phallic plenitude, is a doppelgänger for the Death-Mother, with her resolute power to take away life and keep it all for herself. I wish to turn now to the way that the dream work of Hollywood film puts into play the kinds of insights on offer in Freudian thought.

In her study *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Barbara Creed provocatively argues that the archaic mother is a figure that can have positive value in that she is outside the chain of patriarchal signifiers that misogynistically contain and delimit feminine power; she therefore challenges Freud's preoedipal, phallic mother in that she does not exist in relation to the signifier of the phallus, which imprisons women, the second sex, with its ideology of feminine inferiority to it. In contrast, the archaic mother, whose symbol is the womb, exists in and of

herself, prior to and beyond the phallus. In film, however, Creed argues, the archaic mother, who makes her most frequent appearance in horror movies, is a negative figure, connoting death, symbolized by a devouring, voracious maw. This figure embodies male fears of engulfment by the womb, a terrifying return to origins in which the subject is swallowed up by the same apparatus that sent him forth into the world. Creed's chief example for this phobic portrayal of the archaic mother is Ridley Scott's 1979 film *Alien*, which Creed reads as deeply redolent with negative images of birth and reengulfment. While Creed also reads film narratives in which it is the woman who resists this reengulfment—Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976), for example—her chief concerns are male fear of the womb and the negative, death-dealing cinematic image of the archaic mother. Creed also uses Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection in *Powers of Horror* as a powerful tool in her analysis of the monstrous-feminine of horror film. As Kristeva argued, abjection is related to the mother's body; Creed argues that horror films construct the maternal figure as abject. As Creed puts it, "Kristeva argues that all individuals experience abjection at the time of their earliest attempts to break away from the mother. She sees the mother-child relation as one marked by conflict: the child struggles to break free but the mother is reluctant to release it." Given the prohibitions placed on the mother's body, chiefly the incest taboo, "the maternal body becomes a site of conflicting desires." The mother becomes abject—an object to be discarded, a figure to be escaped—as the child makes his or her break. The films that reenact this early psychic struggle therefore figure the maternal as monstrous. "By refusing to relinquish her hold on her child," Creed writes, "she prevents it from taking up its proper place in relation to the symbolic."²⁷

I argue that there is a tradition of representation of the archaic mother in film that cannot be defined by Creed's classificatory system—an ambivalent tradition that regards the archaic mother with longing and desire and sympathy as well as phobic defensiveness. The unremittingly negative archaic mother, while indeed present in film, is not the only cinematic incarnation of the maternal archetype. I ask us to consider a figure not present in Creed's study—Demeter—in order to develop a fuller understanding of how archetypal femininity figures in film and, most crucially, what it reveals to us about the Hollywood representation of women and female desire, as well as masculine fantasies of women. The most significant filmic representation of these dynamics is Hitchcock's masterpiece, *Vertigo*, in every way—though it has not been interpreted from this perspective before—a reworking of the myth of Demeter and Persephone that sheds light on both the myth and the politics of gender in classical Hollywood practice.

Death-Mother and Male Subject: A Freudian Reading of *Vertigo*

In the myth of Demeter and Persephone, Hades, the god of hell, abducts Persephone, the maiden daughter of Demeter, the earth goddess of grain and fertility. In her grief over the loss of her daughter, Demeter wanders the earth, taking, at one point, the guise of an old woman. In the process of her grievous and angry wandering, Demeter unleashes her wrath against the world, transforming it into a bleak unceasing winter. Finally, Zeus, at the behest of the other gods, intervenes, and a bargain is struck: Persephone will spend half the year with her mother, the other half in hell with Hades, as his bride and chthonic queen. While the numerous versions of the myth and its specific themes demand attention, such a consideration exceeds the parameters of the present chapter, the remainder of which focuses on the ways the myth as well as Freudian themes inform Hitchcock's film.

Hitchcock's film opens with a tense night scene, punctuated by fired bullets, in which a detective, John "Scottie" Ferguson (James Stewart), and a police officer chase a suspect over a series of San Francisco rooftops. The thief jumps to another roof across a wide gulf between buildings; the police officer follows, successfully making it to the other rooftop. When Scottie makes the jump, he slips, slides down the roof, and desperately clings to the railing. When he looks down, he sees the terrifying chasm below. In a complex effect—referred to as the *Vertigo* effect—that Hitchcock and his special effects team painstakingly created to convey the sense of the film protagonist's titular experience of vertigo, the space below simultaneously appears to rise up and to sink into unreachable depths. "Give me your hand," the police officer, himself now just barely clinging to the rooftop, tells Scottie; Scottie can only stare in mute horror either at the policeman or at the horrible deep awaiting beneath him. As he tries to rescue Scottie, the police officer falls to his death. In a resonant nod to Nietzsche, Hitchcock leaves the image of Scottie, though certainly no superman, hanging suspended over a vast abyss.

The mythic referent likeliest to come up in criticism of the film is the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, and with good reason, since this myth is explicitly referenced in the source material for Hitchcock's film, the 1954 French novel *Sueurs Froides (d'Entre Les Morts)* by the writing team Boileau-Narcejac. The poet-musician Orpheus loses his love, Eurydice, to a snake bite; he goes down to hell to attempt to win her back for himself and the world of the living. Profoundly moved by Orpheus's music, Hades and his hellish cohorts give him a chance to reclaim his love: he can take Eurydice out of hell and into the living world, but on one condition: he cannot turn around and look to see if she is behind him until they have left hell. Orpheus agrees with the terms of the bargain, but he is unable to honor them, at the last possible moment breaking

down, looking back at Eurydice, and losing her forever. Certainly, the motifs of a dead beloved's return (or, here, the attempt to return her) and the fatal consequences of looking back enrich *Vertigo*.

As feminist critics have often pointed out, the myth and the uses made of it privilege Orpheus and his quest at Eurydice's expense. What is among the most extraordinary of *Vertigo*'s achievements is that it concerns itself just as poignantly with Eurydice as it does with Orpheus. Or, to put it in the terms of my argument, it is a cinematic rendering of the Persephone complex, a symbolic reworking of the myth of the mother's loss of her daughter, the mother's grief and anger and wandering, the underworld king who abducts, and the daughter's ambivalent and ambiguous response to all those who decide her fate.

Hanging from the rooftop and looking down below, Scottie sees the cavernous, open depths that suggest a maw, waiting to devour him. This image, along the lines of Barbara Creed's theory of the archaic mother, practically screams out its protagonist's terror of engulfment by the original womb. Yet there is another quality here, one that will mark all the moments in which Scottie looks down and sees the perplexing manifestation of his phobia. He *cannot* stop looking down below. Scottie fears the deep gulf, but he is also fascinated by it; it mesmerizes as much as terrifies him.

The next scene in the film, in the apartment of his friend Midge (Barbara Bel Geddes), deepens the conflictual quality of his response. "Midge, what do you mean I've got it and there's no losing it?" Scottie asks her in reference to a point she's made earlier about his condition. Midge explains that she'd asked her doctor, and that was his response; this leads Scottie to respond that he has a theory of his own: he can conquer his vertigo if he does it gradually, in small increments that slowly challenge his fear, leading finally to its elimination. After Midge mocks him (though in the comfortable manner of old friends) for thinking he will prove his theory by stepping on a stool, she produces a stepladder, which Scottie climbs, at first cheerfully saying, "I look up, I look down," and "I'm going to go out and buy myself a nice tall stepladder," in marked contrast to Midge's increasingly worried expression as she looks up at him. When his foot lands on the top step, Scottie looks down and once again sees the horrifying image of the depths (the street far below him and Midge's apartment building window). Yet one could also argue that Scottie sees precisely what he hopes to see. He has painstakingly constructed as close to a nonlethal approximation of his earlier trauma as possible, once again looking down at a street scene below him. This time, though, he has Midge waiting to catch him should he fall. He does fall; she does catch him. Just a few moments earlier, as Scottie and Midge were discussing his condition, he gently chided her: "Now, don't be so motherly, Midge." As he gaped while extending his long cane at a model of a brassiere, one based on the principles behind the cantilever bridge, he asked,

“What’s this doohickey?” Midge responded, “You know about those things, you’re a big boy now.” As if this dialogue had not been explicit enough, the deeply Catholic Hitchcock now frames the image of Midge holding the fallen, anguished Scottie as a remarkable citation of Michelangelo’s *Pietà*. As strongly as he abhors the thought of it, Scottie deeply longs for return to the mother. (As I discuss in [Chapter 3](#), Brian De Palma, in an intertextual manner, reconfigures this Hitchcockian-Catholic image throughout his 1976 film *Carrie*.)

This longing for return to the original mother as well as the dread of this return is, I argue, the chief theme of Hitchcock’s now-legendary work. This theme may account for the devotion filmgoers have felt to this film for decades. In any event, the focus on the maternal themes of the film allows us to consider it in several important ways and in every way as *a woman’s film*, as so many Hitchcock pictures are. Laura Mulvey’s famous theory of the male gaze in classical Hollywood cinema endures as a valuable rubric for the study of gendered representation, but her view of the film as exemplary of male voyeurism—as she argues, one of the two avenues of male escape from castration anxiety, the other being fetishistic scopophilia (of which von Sternberg’s films with Marlene Dietrich are her model)—has imprisoned as much as illuminated *Vertigo*. The focus on Scottie’s character, while understandable, has distracted our attention from how much of the film concerns its female characters and maternal themes as well as male obsessive drives. Moreover, it has obscured the highly significant investment in his female characters on the part of the director. Thinking about the maternal themes of the film allows us to consider the ways in which they inform both the representation of male and female desire and the female experience, of which the trope of transformation is both a key and an index.

An old college acquaintance of Scottie’s whom he hasn’t seen in years, Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore), is one of Hitchcock’s characteristically smooth, urbane, charming villains. Elster lures the vulnerable Scottie into a plot as engulfing as it is absurd: by getting Scottie to follow a woman who impersonates Elster’s wife, Madeleine, Elster is able to get away with the murder of his real wife, by having the fake Madeleine rush to the top of a chapel, apparently to commit suicide, knowing all the while that Scottie will, due to his vertigo, be unable to stop her. Once Kim Novak’s fake Madeleine reaches the top of the chapel, Elster flings down his real wife, whom he has murdered.

The depth and despair in Hitchcock’s treatment of this ornately nonsensical plot is an exemplary instance of the film artist’s ability to transform mediocre source material into a fervent and overwhelmingly affecting personal vision. I argue, along with Tania Modleski, that what makes the film so affecting for Hitchcock is not only Scottie’s voyeuristic and fetishistic obsession but also the story of Madeleine’s obsession with her dead female ancestor, Carlotta Valdes, as well as the obsession with both Madeleine and the Carlotta Valdes backstory

that develops with Judy Barton, the woman who impersonates Madeleine Elster, both played indelibly by Novak. What makes *Vertigo* so resonantly a woman's film is Hitchcock's deployment of a key theme from the genre: a woman's conflictual struggle not only to break free from her mother but also to develop a relationship with her once she has managed to do so (this is an important theme in such classic women's films as *Imitation of Life* and *Now, Voyager*). *Vertigo* takes this theme to a mythic height, transforming the Hollywood mother-daughter narrative into a new myth of femininity. In this regard, *Vertigo* is not only a great Hitchcock film but also an exemplary woman's film.

Overall, what this book will attempt to show are the ways in which the Freudian understanding of femininity as a battle for power and agency in a misogynistic culture, a battle that females are instinctively primed to fight, finds a vivid representation in the woman's film and later in modern horror. Modern horror film preserves the influence Freud's writings on femininity had on classical Hollywood and, moreover, reflects the coherence of these Freudian feminine mythologies within the continuum of Hollywood representations of gender, sexuality, and the family. Taken together, the woman's films and modern horror emerge as a powerful, affecting, disturbing, limited, daring, galvanizing Hollywood narrative about femininity that springs directly from Freudian theories—for better and for worse.

Freud's views of femininity are significant to any discussion of Hollywood's representation of femininity. On the one hand, his views had a direct influence on those who worked in classical Hollywood and on American culture generally at this time. On the other hand, in his simultaneously evident misogyny and acute perceptiveness about the ways in which patriarchy constructs images of women as well as female experience, Freud's work can be understood as a template for Hollywood depictions of femininity. The representation of women and femininity throughout the twentieth century and into the present has largely been the product of male fantasy, which probably accounts for the misogyny in both psychoanalysis and Hollywood. (It can never be underestimated, of course, that the "births" of both psychoanalysis and the cinema were coterminous.) Nevertheless, many of us have found much that is moving, resonant, affecting, and profoundly insightful in both psychoanalysis and Hollywood film, despite all of their innumerable ideological infractions. This book attempts to make sense of the radicalism as well as the reaction in these mythic systems.

CHAPTER 2

Transformations of the Woman's Film

Or, Feminine Myths

M^{iss} Charlotte Vale . . .

Those words sound particularly venomous, a term of abuse, when spat out by Charlotte Vale's mother (Gladys Cooper), a patrician, hard-hearted elderly woman whose domination of her sensitive, though inwardly steely, daughter Charlotte (Bette Davis) has led to her incipient emotional collapse at the start of Irving Rapper's 1942 film *Now, Voyager*, one of the indelible woman's films, based on Olive Higgins Prouty's bestseller of the same name. The widowed Mrs. Vale simultaneously wants Charlotte to marry well (she approves of Charlotte's eventual suitor Elliot Livingston, dull but well born) and to keep her daughter all to herself—"No man is ever good enough," Charlotte observes. The mother's simultaneous desire to marry off and to preserve her daughter in this film evokes the Demeter-Persephone myth, especially in that Mrs. Vale's most urgently felt motive appears to be holding onto Charlotte no matter what the costs. At the start of the film, Charlotte crawls downstairs from her room, her secret lair, where, locking the door behind her, she barricades herself from the world, from her mother's pitiless gaze and endless need as well as the unceasing barbs of her young, caustic niece June (Bonita Granville). In terms of conventional bodily appearance, Charlotte wears her despair outwardly. Bespectacled, overweight, ungainly, with her messy hair and eyebrows like paired hairy caterpillars, in an unflattering dress that emphasizes her physical lumpiness and the severe "sensible" shoes her mother insists she wear, the early Charlotte exudes sadness, self-neglect, and conformity to her strong mother's will. The film will set out to enact—some might say enforce—a series of female transformations. Charlotte transmogrifies from this outwardly unhappy person, trapped in a body that evinces her deprivation, to an outwardly happy, confident woman, now inhabiting a body that, in its stylishness

and sleekness, properly reflects her interior transformation into a self-reliant, forthright, reasonably satisfied and fulfilled person. The mother-daughter themes and the theme of transformation endemic to the woman's film seamlessly coalesce in this film. Along with these themes, the film foregrounds the theme of male psychoanalytic intervention into the plight of women, and in so doing is probably the most direct cinematic rendering of Freud's writings on femininity, even if the psychiatrist here, Dr. Jaquith (Claude Rains), as Lauren Berlant points out, is not a Freudian.¹ Jaquith, played with sympathetic aplomb by Rains, is Freud the pessimistic psychoanalyst transformed into affirming American psychotherapist. The mental health institution over which he presides is called Cascade, a resort for the privileged and emotionally troubled, with Jaquith as psychic tour guide through the Dantean wood of mental illness: "People come to a fork in the road, they become confused. I say, not this way, that way," Jaquith explains, with perhaps overly emphatic modesty. Eschewing the fancy jargon of the "fakers and the writers of books," Jaquith would certainly never lecture Charlotte on the death drive or on the ongoing struggles a woman will encounter in dealing with her mother well into her adult life: as Freud observed, even the husband substitutes for the woman's mother, the original object of desire and perpetual site of conflict. Freud argued that the effects of the social order and its constrictions manifest themselves in women on a physical level, aging them before their time and rendering them haggard and defeated (as the 1945 Davis-Rains film *Mr. Skeffington* piercingly thematizes). Jaquith's cure creates a fresh, polished, attractive woman out of unhappy Charlotte's apparently lumpen flesh.

What is most interesting here, and most often overlooked—especially by those who are critical of the film precisely for its apparent message that only the male psychiatrist can rescue Charlotte—is that Charlotte moves further and further away from any dependence on Dr. Jaquith. Indeed, by the end of the film he has been rendered largely irrelevant, Charlotte having more or less, through financial endowments and volunteering, taken over Cascade. Charlotte, in other words, subsumes the institutional practice that simultaneously freed and imprisons her. In contrast, *The Silence of the Lambs*, the modern horror film in deepest intertextual engagement with *Now, Voyager*, leaves its transformed heroine locked into a perpetual conflict with the psychiatrist figure who has helped her in her quest for transformation, even as it makes this psychiatrist figure unquestionably a figure of evil.

In many ways, the story the film tells is a conventional one mired in a series of familiar confluences: physical unattractiveness and emotional disturbance; physical attractiveness and emotional well-being; male wisdom and female ignorance; marriage and isolation; strong mother and weak daughter; and so forth. I would argue, however, that despite being structured by these dubious

binarisms, the film diligently works at denaturing and challenging its own structure. The overweight, unattractive, and deeply vulnerable Charlotte is neither defenseless nor unaware of her own need for liberation. She wields a spiky, almost menacing, erotically charged wit and a keen self-awareness. "Introverted, Doctor?": her first words in the film, spoken to Jaquith, slyly and challengingly alert him to her awareness of the psychiatric proclivity for jargon, with its implications for sexist power relations; she satirizes his role as her would-be savior. While there is a suggestion that Charlotte is attracted to Jaquith (the way Bette Davis delivers the line in which Charlotte compliments Jaquith on his hands after he has been self-deprecating about them, and then gives him one of the ivory boxes she hand carves), the film will treat the relationship more and more skeptically. Moreover, Charlotte diagnoses, before Jaquith's intervention, her relationship to her mother as the impediment to her personal fulfillment ("My mother, my mother, my *mother!*").

On the ship, the remade Charlotte, whom everyone on board initially, mistakenly, and excruciatingly believes to be her famous impersonator-cousin Renée, meets Jerry Durrance (Paul Henreid), an unhappily married man who becomes Charlotte's possible lover and who, in any event, functions as her exotically foreign, seductive love interest as they end up becoming traveling companions throughout South America. (His ethnic identity is never made clear in the film; he signs as vaguely European.) At one early point in their relationship, over lunch, Jerry thoughtfully looks at Charlotte, quite diffident at first, and remarks, "I wish that I understood you." He gets up to pay the bill, and then we look at Charlotte looking at her own reflection. "He wishes . . . he wishes *he* understood me," she quietly muses. Such introspective moments make *Now, Voyager* both resonant and self-reflexive. Charlotte's own identity, her own appearance, are as mysterious to her as they are to anyone else. While this isn't a new take on "woman," as Freud's infamous description of women as the "dark continent" attests, what makes it both interesting and poignant is the film's willingness to expose outward appearance as mask, conventional femininity as masquerade.

In her famous essay "Woman and the Masquerade," Joan Riviere, a British psychoanalyst who was Freud's earliest translator, argued that, given the construction of femininity in culture, women must impersonate femaleness; being female is mimicry, a masquerade.² In her study *Femmes Fatales*, Mary Ann Doane notes, "Masquerade is not theorized by Riviere as a joyful or affirmative play but as an anxiety-ridden compensatory gesture, as a position which is potentially disturbing, uncomfortable, and inconsistent, as well as psychically painful for the woman."³ I would argue that *Now, Voyager* not only rehearses Riviere's themes but provides a critique of misogyny that is analogous to hers. The film explores the social constraints on female subjectivity in a culture that

demands corporeal coherence and psychic obeisance from women. Doane has influentially argued that the film is misogynistic, subjecting its heroine first to the imprisoning objectification of the medical gaze and then making her the object of the erotic one, as Charlotte transforms from an unkempt frump under psychiatric care into an object of specular, sexual fixation.⁴ In disagreement with Doane, I view the film generally as a critique of misogyny, a feminist work despite its occasional capitulations to misogyny. As such, it is metonymic of the ways in which the radicalism of woman's films has often been distorted in feminist criticism, at least from my queer perspective.

The film follows the lines of Riviere's argument that the performance of femininity—the masquerade of womanliness—is a damaging, wounding experience for women. Moreover, it suggests a female identity that lies beyond what either the film or its characters can imagine, a Charlotte *not* representable, still in the process of becoming, and therefore as unknowable as she is elusive. Which is to say, the film imagines a femininity that is neither theorizable nor colonizable, neither classifiable nor tangible. In this manner, *transformation*—a phenomenon of central importance to this study, and not one that can be adequately described in brief but that takes this entire study to explicate—takes on a potentially radical dimension. In presenting identity as a series of shifts, a phenomenon in flux, *Now, Voyager* figures transformation as a kind of agency and a kind of liberation, even as it inevitably intersects with the very forces of normativity to which it provides an alternative. Charlotte's transformation makes her a “natural woman,” in all the normative senses of that term, but it also gives her a space—a chrysalis of self-awareness rather than slumber—in which to negotiate her own wants, untold and otherwise.

The film extends the theme of transformation through its motif of the butterfly. When Charlotte appears one evening in the swanky shipboard dining room to meet Jerry, she wears a dress borrowed from her glamorous cousin, the entertainer Renée Beauchamp. A butterfly pattern is woven into the dress; Jerry notices these “fritillaries,” as he names them. With his use of Latin, the classificatory universal language of science, Jerry implicitly classifies Charlotte along with the butterflies as a species under scientific scrutiny. Such moments add to Mary Ann Doane's point that the film subjects Charlotte to the “medical gaze,” among others. But who *is* Charlotte, at this point? Further noticing a note pinned to her dress, Jerry asks her if someone has been playing a joke on her. “Unpin it, please,” tautly comments Charlotte. Renée had attached a note telling her to wear this dress, sure to “make an impression.” “So your wings are borrowed,” responds Jerry, not quite as adept at smoothing over awkward moments as he attempts to be. He reassures her that the dress suits her no less well, but Charlotte will have none of it. “Someone is playing a joke, only it's far funnier than you conceive,” she tells him, with barely contained emotion.

Through its employment of a deeply familiar, obvious symbol of change, this scene openly acknowledges the centrality of the theme of transformation to the woman's film. Yet the scene also defamiliarizes the import of the symbol. Charlotte's wings are not just borrowed but an alien and alienating appendage, as constrictive as a cage. Another woman's clothing becomes a woman's imprisoning masquerade—Riviere's point, as Mary Ann Doane interprets her famous essay "Woman and the Masquerade," that women chafe against the female masquerade.

Moreover, the note—the letter, as another famous Davis film makes clear, so loaded with significance—functions as the lock of this costume cage, fastening Charlotte to another kind of fixed identity—Renée's "cousin," Camille, a persona Jerry invents for her *on the spot*—precisely the reverse of all of Charlotte's efforts to break free from an endless series of constrictions. Jerry will emerge as a darker, more ambiguous character throughout the film, but here his obtuseness makes him rather sympathetic: how does one assuage the pain of a person so passionately invested in self-loathing? But there is more than self-loathing here—there is also anger, directed outwardly. If Davis embodies masochistic suffering in several of her key roles, a barely concealed rage colors this masochism, one of the reasons Davis, even at her most restrained, as she is here, always seems like she's about to explode.

In writing this way about *Now, Voyager*, I am moving against the tide of feminist film criticism and along with currents in gay male appreciation of the work, insofar as it exists. Mike Black's fascinating 2009 film *Queer Icon: The Cult of Bette Davis* movingly synthesizes the numerous reasons for enduring gay male love of this film. As one Davis fan theorizes in Black's documentary, *Now, Voyager* is the one Davis film no drag performer ever satirizes: for gay men, it's a sacred text. The late gay critic Andrew Britton's brilliant essay on the film, "A New Servitude," in which he links the film to Victorian feminist literature such as *Jane Eyre*, has certainly shaped my understanding of the film's achievement.

Martin Shingler has argued that, while neither Joan Riviere's theory of masquerade nor Judith Butler's theory of gender as drag can fully account for the kinds of negotiations of gender identity within Davis's star femininity, both theories can profitably illuminate the strangeness of Davis's screen gender. With her short hair and ambivalence over normative femininity, even at her swankiest, Davis's Charlotte at times seems to suggest a lesbian identity, as Patricia White has also argued in her study of lesbian representation in classical Hollywood.⁵ Moreover, Shingler has importantly argued for the ironic pleasures of Davis's stardom, as exemplified in *Mr. Skeffington*, in which the unconventionally attractive Davis plays a woman famed for her beauty; Davis's gender ambiguity and ironic detachment from the roles she plays make her a singularly interesting performer to watch, especially for queer audiences.⁶ More generally speaking, Richard Dyer's work has been significant in terms of theorizing gay male devotion to the female star, and Brett

Farmer has explored the relevance of Freudian theories of the “phallic mother” to gay male spectatorship (Gloria Swanson’s Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* [1950] is exemplary in this regard).⁷

Yet any analysis of the female star and star vehicle—especially one as deeply invested in the emotional bonds within this identification as the present study—inevitably confronts a rather shocking disparity between feminist and queer-themed criticism. The presiding response of feminist film criticism to *Now, Voyager*, from Mary Ann Doane’s standard study *The Desire to Desire* to Lauren Berlant’s *The Female Complaint*, has been a highly skeptical one, a framing of the film as misogynistic; one of the rare exceptions has been the case Patricia White makes for the lesbian daring of the film.⁸ The academic feminist response to this movie has been as critical as the gay male response has been rapturous.

Another curious aspect of the critical reception of this film also emerges: the almost total lack of interest in feminine melodrama by high-profile, high-theory queer theorists of film such as D. A. Miller, Lee Edelman, and others. As Patricia White observes, in the context of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*, never given much of a critical due either by mainstream male film theorists or by male queer theorists, gay male film critics are implicated in a politics of film theory that eschews or leaves out altogether questions of femininity. In her view, critics such as Miller and Edelman cast women in Hitchcock films as “a clear-cut signifier of sexual difference,” leaving women characters at that dubious level of signification as they focus on the figure of the crypto-homosexual killer.⁹ Along the same lines, Tania Modleski takes these critics to task in her new afterword to her classic feminist study of Hitchcock, *The Women Who Knew Too Much*. One of the implications of high-queer theory’s insistence on analyzing (pun intended) masculinity in classical Hollywood narrative at the expense of other concerns is that gay male identificatory practices have been similarly limited to studies of screen masculinities. In other words, gay male spectators watch only *themselves* on the screen, and almost always in homophobically abnegated form, as queer theorists would have it. Very little work has been done on the ways in which gay males may identify with *female* characters as well as male, or experience femininity as relevant to, allegorical of, or in some other way deeply interesting in terms of their own sexuality.

Though Richard Dyer has paid considerably more attention to this issue than Miller or Edelman, Dyer also severely delimits the range of gay male responses to the female star and narrative. In his well-known essay on the gay male idealization of Judy Garland, Dyer writes, “There is nothing arbitrary about the gay reading of Garland; it is a product of the way homosexuality is socially constructed, without and within the gay subculture itself. It does not tell us what gay men are inevitably and naturally drawn to from some built-in

disposition granted by their sexuality, but it does tell us of the way that a social-sexual identity has been understood and felt at a certain period of time . . . [Garland's qualities] mean a lot because they are made expressive of what it has been to be gay in the past half century." Though Dyer is surely correct that gay male desire is as socially constructed as any other form of desire, I believe he misses out on the genuine cultural intervention gay male audiences have made in their appropriation, celebration, and, in some cases, canonization of the female star.¹⁰ Something in stars like Garland, Marilyn Monroe, Audrey Hepburn, Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Madonna, and Lady Gaga have spoken not only to but *for* gay men, in ways that go beyond social construction and simple and overwhelming nostalgia. (Interestingly enough, while a lesbian icon, and eminently imitable, Katharine Hepburn has rarely figured in gay male cultural formations, such as drag, though she is the subject of a book-length study by Andrew Britton. The same holds true for the great Barbara Stanwyck, more commonly celebrated as a lesbian icon.) Surely something more than either must account for the queer *jouissance* of gay singer-songwriter Rufus Wainwright's 2006 recreation of the famous 1961 Judy Garland concert at Carnegie Hall and the drag performances of Bette Davis on deeply invested display in *Queer Icon*. The possibility that the archive of gay male fandom raises is that gay male identity isn't fixed in the amber of periodicity but endures as a coherent sensibility, however shaped by culture into distinct patterns, *across* time.

Miller, Edelman, and Dyer are not the only critics to ignore or delimit the varieties of gay male spectatorship. Robert Lang's study *Masculine Interests* merits consideration here.¹¹ As I note later in this chapter, Lang's reading of the melodrama most closely matches my own. His *Masculine Interests*, however, is more problematic. In Lang's provocative thesis, men learn how to become men by looking at—and identifying with—other men, a process that Hollywood film endlessly facilitates. Lang focuses on films that especially reinforce this point by foregrounding a central male-male relationship: Disney's *The Lion King* (1994), *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932), *Batman Forever* (1995), *Batman and Robin* (1997), *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), and *Jerry Maguire* (1996), among others.

An immediate concern about Lang's project, despite its brilliance, is his indifference to Hollywood's equally lengthy procession of rebels, loners, and outcasts forced to forge an identity in which self, not another male, is the mirror. Such characters include the Norman Bateses and Travis Bickles of Hollywood cinema, terrifyingly isolate figures forced to forge an identity within the crucible of self. Lang doesn't cover those lonely bases. But more pressingly, one wonders if men, especially gay men, can also identify with women onscreen. When we consider the legions of gay male fans of great female film stars like Davis, Crawford, Garland, Monroe, Barbra Streisand, Liza Minnelli, and Meryl

Streep (and what a diverse list, attesting to the distinct ways that female stars speak to gay men), it seems clear that these stars have served as a mirror for gay men, perhaps even more than Bogie or Batman or Ben Stiller does.¹² As I will argue throughout this study, gay men have traced their desire just as often through identification with female stars as with male, and often with deeper levels of affiliation and resistant complicity. In the last chapter, this line of argument comes to a fork in the road, as Dr. Jaquith's patients do; I argue that the patterns of gay and queer male affiliation with the melodramatic and horror heroine ultimately result in a negative confrontation in which the heroine must destroy the queer monster. Despite this conclusion, I believe there is much to appreciate in the resonance heroines have had for queer male audiences.

Redefining the Woman's Film

One of the central themes of this book is that the woman's film, a classical Hollywood genre seemingly defunct by the 1960s, takes on a new, albeit hidden, life in the modern horror film, insofar as it concerns anxieties within gender, sexuality, and the family and focuses on female desire. Major woman's films—such as *Alice Adams* (George Stevens, 1935), *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), *Nou, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942), *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophuls, 1948), *The Heiress* (William Wyler, 1949), *Beyond the Forest* (King Vidor, 1949), *Autumn Leaves* (Robert Aldrich, 1956), *Marnie* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1964)—place a woman's desire at the center of their plots and themes. Many significant works of modern horror—a new phase in the genre, beginning with Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and roughly terminating with *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991)—should be read, I argue, as “concealed women's films,” to rework the terminology of Robert B. Ray, placing, as does the woman's film, female desire at the center of narrative.¹³ Desire can be taken to mean sexual desire, but desire is too complex a category to be limited to the sexual. One could argue the desire that motivates Alice Adams (Katharine Hepburn) or Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) in *The Silence of the Lambs* is more ardently pitched toward class advancement than erotic fulfillment.

The woman's film genre is as capacious as it is contested a field. Nevertheless, I believe we can isolate certain major themes in the genre that will emerge as prominent influences for modern horror: the mother-daughter relationship, often depicted as conflictual as well as highly emotionally charged; related to this issue, sometimes directly, anxieties over courtship, marriage, and heterosexual relationships generally; anxieties over female sexuality specifically, especially in its incipient manifestation; the figure of the phallic, avenging woman who destroys her enemies, usually in the form of “defective” men, a campaign with powerful positive implications for feminist and queer audiences and

identificatory practices, as well as some much more negative ones, as I will show in the last chapter; and, finally, and in some ways in summation, the woman's transformation, either at certain points in or over the course of the narrative, which at times occurs on a physical level, and then quite dramatically, but can also occur on an emotional or social one and sometimes all at once. Before proceeding to a discussion of themes and influences, it is necessary to establish my understanding of the woman's film genre, given the often quite varied debates over what constitutes the genre in the first place.

Jeanine Basinger, in her study *A Woman's View*, offers a persuasive description of what constitutes the woman's film: it is one that "places at the center of its universe a female who is trying to deal with emotional, social, and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the fact that she is a woman."¹⁴ She also argues that the woman's film genre far exceeds the boundaries of melodrama; to limit the genre to melodrama would "eliminate more than half of the films that are concerned with women and their fates, among them Rosalind Russell's career comedies, musical biographies of real-life women, combat films featuring brave nurses on Bataan, and westerns in which women drive cattle west and men over the brink."¹⁵ Basinger echoes what Andrea Walsh had written a decade earlier: the category *woman's film* "is an umbrella term referring to films of the 1930s to early 1950s, created primarily for a female audience."¹⁶ Walsh argued that the woman's film "cannot be considered a genre by any definition of the term; it partakes of a variety of narrative moods (comedy, melodrama), visual styles (mainstream Hollywood and *film noir*), and plot structures (romantic triangles, female kin dramas, and murder mysteries). However, women's films do comprise a recognizable and analyzable mode of cinema because of common psychological motifs that distinguish films produced largely for female viewers from those created primarily for male or mixed audiences."¹⁶ Though in my estimation neither Basinger nor Walsh adequately represents the depth, despair, or potential for terror in many significant woman's films, I follow them in seeing the genre as intensely wide ranging and also genre fluid. As they argue, there can be gangster and western versions of the woman's film and numerous other kinds of genre crossovers, a view I extend by arguing that the woman's film also cross-fertilizes with the horror genre, both in the studio era and in modern horror.

"The images we retain," Molly Haskell writes in her discussion of the great female stars of classical Hollywood, "are not those of subjugation or humiliation; rather we remember their intermediate victories . . . images of intelligence and personal style and forcefulness."¹⁷ Not everyone has shared Haskell's view.¹⁸ In her highly influential 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey argues that femininity in classical Hollywood was a spectacle meant for male eyes, those of the protagonist and the spectator who identify

with the male protagonist's gaze, whatever the gender of the spectator. Joining and sharing in the protagonist's narcissistic omnipotence, to which psychic state the classical film text returns the spectator along with the protagonist, we participate with him in his two strategies for avoiding, deflecting, or reassuring himself against the castration anxieties the female figure generates in him as well as us: voyeurism, which involves obsessively investigating the woman, solving her "mystery," and fetishistic scopophilia, or "the cult of the female star," which strategy and psychic defense involves cutting up the image of woman into components, such as through the technique of the close-up. Many, many commentators have either extended or critiqued Mulvey's essay in the years to follow; perhaps the chief proof of its resiliency has been its ability to stand up to these innumerable readings.¹⁹

Mary Ann Doane, in her standard study *The Desire to Desire*, writes that the label *woman's film* "refers to a genre of Hollywood films produced from the silent era through the 1950s and early 60s but most heavily concentrated and most popular in the 1930s and 40s."²⁰ I follow Doane in seeing the genre as extending into the 1960s; I would argue that it reaches its apotheosis in the mammoth, underrated *Cleopatra* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1963), after which it goes underground, emerging in the form of modern horror. "There is an extremely strong temptation to find in these films a viable alternative to the unrelenting objectification and oppression of the figure of the woman in mainstream Hollywood cinema." But, she cautions, "the woman's film does not provide us with an access to a pure and authentic female subjectivity, much as we might like it to do so. It provides us instead with an image repertoire of poses—classical feminine poses and assumptions about the female appropriation of the gaze. Hollywood women's films of the 1940s," the decade most scholars agree represents the height of the genre, "document a crisis in subjectivity around the figure of the woman—although it is not always clear whose subjectivity is at stake." There is, she observes, "an intense and aberrant quality in the 40s films which is linked to the ideological upheaval signaled by a redefinition of sexual roles and the reorganization of the family during the war years." She also notes, and again I follow her in this, that "the woman's film is frequently combined with other genres—the film noir and the gothic or horror film, even the musical."²¹

In another influential reading, Thomas Elsaesser has defined the genre as the "Freudian feminist melodrama."²² His reading focuses on German émigré Douglas Sirk's Hollywood melodramas of the 1950s. As Jackie Byars writes, Sirk's films "were reconstructed as social criticism, and politically oriented critics looked for other such films. A genre was born. The historical genre of 'melodrama' had long been understood and accepted (though generally denigrated) by the industry and by audiences"; now, the idea that certain highly stylized and

ideologically resistant “family melodramas,” made by a select group of particularly talented filmmakers such as Sirk, took hold. “Constructing ‘melodrama’ in terms of this small group of films obscured the existence of other melodramatic genres,” such as the western.²³ It is precisely this obscuring of the wide range of melodrama’s genre manifestations that preoccupies Steve Neale in his book *Genre and Hollywood*.²⁴

Neale takes considerable pains to demonstrate that the common readings of the woman’s film as a continuation of the generic line of the melodrama from the nineteenth century forward seriously distorts the capaciousness of the term melodrama. In the classical Hollywood era alone, melodrama was understood very broadly to apply to a wide variety of genres—crime, action adventure, and “masculine genres,” as well as to woman’s films. He faults critics like Basinger for failing to “trace the history of the woman’s film as a product, a term, or a category.”²⁵ “All I would add,” Neale mock-mildly writes, is that “the standard account has tended to founder on the assumption that the woman’s film embodies the quintessence” of melodrama. He usefully reminds us of the “multi-generic nature” of melodrama’s nineteenth-century heritage, while also insisting on that heritage as primarily based in “genres of action.” The woman’s film, therefore, “and other genres of passion are related to modified and secondary rather than basic and primary nineteenth-century conventions and forms.”²⁶ What can be agreed on about any form of melodrama is that its chief concern and intended goal is to produce “intensity of feeling.” In this regard, I would add, the Hollywood woman’s film, with its heightened emotions, throbbing musical scores, and intensely dramatic “situations,” certainly qualifies as melodramatic. Moreover, as many critics critiqued by Neale here have themselves put it, the woman’s film genre was quite comfortable with genre hopping and multigeneric hybridization. In the end, Neale’s exhaustive treatment seems to me a helpful footnote to the numerous debates over what properly constitutes the genre of the woman’s film rather than a defining intervention.

My own understanding of the genre primarily proceeds from Robert Lang’s. As Lang writes in his study *American Film Melodrama*,

The melodrama is . . . first a drama of identity. A woman (or a woman’s point of view) dominates the narrative of the family melodrama because individual identity within the patriarchal context—always defined by a masculine standard—is problematic for women. The dominant ideology asserts that, whether or not a woman is at the center of narrative, what is at stake in the melodrama will be a question of identity—of a failure to be masculine, or of a failure to accept the repressive, subjectivity-denying strictures of patriarchal femininity. Patriarchy, it should be reiterated, understands femininity as a failure to be masculine. Feminine subjectivity is an impossibility according to the logic of patriarchy, which defines it, with an inevitably negative connotation, as “not-male.” We might

think of “true” feminine subjectivity—on its own terms, not defined negatively—as being a possibility that is still evolving . . . The family melodrama is a genre that addresses this problem. In the family melodrama the villain changes over time, but in one way or another the villain is some aspect of the patriarchy.²⁷

While families certainly do thematically dominate the genre, and while I will be speaking directly to this issue throughout this study in my concern with mother-daughter relationships, I would add that “family melodrama” is not an accurate description of the broad range of films I discuss here, especially given the fixation in the films on the figure of the independent woman eager to break away *from* family. My understanding of female melodrama is otherwise close to Lang’s.

In the 1980s, Doane called our attention to the “image repertoire” of the woman’s film. She was deploying this phrase as a critique of the system that produced the woman’s film and as a corrective to any assumption that the woman’s film was a progressive genre for the representation of “woman,” but I find more positive value in it. My chief aim in this book is to explore the significance of certain images, themes, preoccupations, and potentialities at work in both the woman’s film and horror genres, which I make a case for being interconnected. I am much more comfortable, then, with the idea of femininity as a collection of “poses” than Doane is, not because I fail to see the misogyny that attends to such a collection but because I view, following the work of Judith Butler, any representation of gender, sexual, and racial identity as inherently symbolic, always already a pose. Serious ideological implications proceed from any form of representation, and I will be frequently discussing these implications. Nevertheless, the symbolic femininities of Hollywood film have a considerable value and interest insofar as they represent certain attitudes toward gender and its meanings; enact tensions in the ways in which gender is culturally constructed; illuminate what is at stake for culture in the insistent prevalence of certain *kinds* of gender poses; and lend themselves to multifarious forms of appropriation and speculation. In terms of this last point, though it is one that I will make my focus not in this but in the next chapter, I am concerned with the ways in which Hollywood femininity has had an often resistant and galvanizing value for gay male audiences, long before the transformation of gay into queer identity and beyond this point.

What is especially interesting about the repertoire of feminine poses is the surprising usefulness this repertoire has had for gay male audiences. As a collection of attitudes and a consensus over what kinds of conflicts and hopes define American femininity, the woman’s film, while intensely meaningful to audiences of the studio era, by all accounts has considerably less relevance to female audiences of the present. Yet as Mike Black’s documentary *Queer Icon*:

The Cult of Bette Davis makes palpably clear, classical Hollywood constructions of femininity continue to resonate for queer audiences, who have taken a rejected female repertoire as a resistant archive for their own conflicts and hopes. My project in this book, I want to make clear, is as feminist as it is queer, despite my frequent disagreements with the feminist treatments of both the woman's film and horror. In my view, the woman's film and modern horror, despite considerable ideological lapses and limitations, both thematize and critique the cultural foundations of misogyny as well as homophobia. To return to the central themes I numbered at the start of the chapter, I want to proceed now to analyses of how each of them, in turn and together, inform and shape the woman's film genre.

Single Blessedness

Linda Williams, writing in the 1980s, described the general feminist understanding at that time of the male and female forms of filmic narrative: "male' linear, action-packed narratives that encourage identification with predominantly male characters who 'master' their environment; and 'female' less linear narratives encouraging identification with passive, suffering heroines." Williams found much to disagree with in the trends of feminist film criticism when this article was written; I would contest the position that the passive, suffering heroine is at the center of most woman's films, though this figure is certainly a recurring one. Many of the women protagonists of these films are levelheaded, if not hardheaded, pragmatists whose tough aplomb is threatened by one inescapable social phenomenon: marriage. At the center of many entries in the woman's film genre is what Carolyn Heilbrun has called "the romance plot." Heilbrun associated the quest plot with masculine fictions and the romance plot, leading up to and culminating in marriage and family, with the feminine.²⁹ I will refine Heilbrun slightly for our purposes and simply call this "the marriage plot." The chief tension in several important woman's films concerns the heroine's relationship to the marriage plot—will she opt for marriage or will she choose, like *Now, Voyager's* Charlotte Vale, to live a life of "single blessedness"? Most woman's films hinge upon this question. The suspenseful question of marriage that hangs over and organizes these narratives is a familiar one to any reader of the novels of Jane Austen, enduringly popular tales of intelligent, unusual young women whose fates—figured in their marital status—hang in the balance. (The recent spate of horror-genre "mash-ups" of Austen, such as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, effects a print version of the kind of cinematic genre transformation I discuss in this book.)

Variations of this question in the woman's film include a choice between two men (*The Philadelphia Story*; *Deception*; *Daisy Kenyon*); unrequited or otherwise

hopeless love (*The Letter*, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, *Humoresque*, *Possessed*, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*); or marriage that ensues but to a disturbed, sullen, angry, or even homicidal man (*Rebecca*, *Gaslight*, *Caught*, *Deception*, *Sudden Fear*, *Autumn Leaves*). The heroine's relationship to marriage—the sign of domesticity, reproductivity, the proper realization of normative gendered identity (for both women *and* men)—emerges as such a difficult conflict in the woman's film because the woman's very personhood is at stake. The heroine's eccentricities and idiosyncrasies—her vital singularity—make her a heroine in the first place, and it is precisely these qualities that are so onerously threatened by the marriage plot.

Katharine Hepburn's defiantly, brashly unusual Alice Adams, the titular figure of George Stevens's film version of the Booth Tarkington novel, chafes against small-town strictures and the pervasive snobbery of the smart set that always eludes and contemns her. Once she meets Fred MacMurray's Arthur Russell—charming and, though from this same snobby smart set, kind—Alice encounters the great danger of being forced to relinquish her intransigently quirky, unclassifiable identity for marriage. MacMurray's Arthur finds Alice breathtaking. Once he learns of her social undesirability, however, he rejects her. The studio imposed a “happy” ending in which Arthur returns with an implicit promise of marriage, but the sting of rejection permeates the final section of the film. What also adds to the raw quality of this final section is the overhanging sense that, in order to achieve normative happiness, Alice will be forced to relinquish her heroically singular identity. In Irving Rapper's *Now, Voyager*, the dowdy, depressive spinster, Charlotte Vale, undergoes an extraordinary transformation through the ministrations of her psychiatrist, Dr. Jaquith, on both a physical and an emotional level. The physical transformation far exceeds, in its efficacy, the emotional one; she is still quite troubled (“I've been very sick, and I'm not well yet”) beneath her newly svelte appearance. On a pleasure cruise to Brazil arranged by Jaquith and her kindly sister-in-law, she meets Jerry Durrance, a vaguely European and unhappily married man, who gives Charlotte her fullest experience of romantic love, albeit an adulterous one that cannot exist in the actual, non-pleasure-cruise world. One of the extraordinary statements made by *Now, Voyager*—which takes its title from Walt Whitman's “The Untold Want” from *Songs of Parting* (“The untold want by life and land n'er granted / Now Voyager, sail thou forth to seek and find.”)—is that single blessedness is preferable not only to marriage but also to any kind of heterosexual relationship. The film ends with Charlotte having decided to raise Jerry's daughter Tina—once unhappy and mousy, now blooming under Charlotte's ministrations into an emotionally healthy and physically appealing young woman, as confirmed by her climactic appearance in a white dress—even as she appears to relegate Jerry to the sidelines. The theme of change is embedded in the plots

of these films, most clearly in the question of whether or not the quirky single heroine will be transformed into a marriageable one. This question, which continues to be obsessively thematized in contemporary cultural institutions such as the HBO series and current film franchise *Sex and the City* and reality series such as *The Bachelorette*, comes up often in the woman's film.

There are numerous precedents and influences for the woman's film and for modern horror, particularly for the conflictual attitudes toward marriage each genre exhibits. As I attempted to demonstrate in [Chapter 1](#), Freudian theory provides an illuminating template for themes that run throughout the depictions of femininity in classical Hollywood and modern horror, particularly in, to use Elsaesser's term, the "Freudian feminist melodrama." Many critics have sought to link the woman's film to nineteenth-century narratives, especially in terms of melodrama. While in agreement with these linkages, I argue that intertexts for the woman's film can be found much earlier, in classical mythology, especially the Homeric myth of Demeter and Persephone. The mother-daughter theme is directly tied to anxieties over incipient female sexuality and to marriage, in keeping with the myth of Demeter and Persephone from which these themes as a bundle derive. In the next few sections, I note the particulars of the Homeric myth that are especially relevant to the woman's film genre and to the cultural work it undertakes.³⁰

Persephone in the Underworld

The Demeter-Persephone myth has attracted an enormous amount of feminist interest in the past three decades. Given the patriarchal logic of ancient Greece, in which women were largely confined to their homes, given little or no education, and given little or no social freedom, the Demeter-Persephone myth stands in sharp contrast to its larger social milieu, which must, in part, account for its usefulness as a kind of vent for female sorrow and rage in the Western tradition. Critics have, in debates still left unresolved, argued that the woman's film flows out of nineteenth-century melodrama and Victorian feminine fictions, often in the gothic category, such as those by the Brontë sisters. A more immediate precedent, I argue, is the overwhelming late-Victorian fascination with ancient matriarchies and with femininity in the classical world generally. As Josephine Donovan demonstrates in her study of the Demeter-Persephone myth in the writings of Edith Wharton (whose novella *The Old Maid* is the source material for the important Bette Davis film of the same name, from 1939), Willa Cather, and Ellen Glasgow, the myth preoccupied feminist thought in the latter nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. "The Demeter-Persephone myth is singularly relevant to the historical transition that occurred in middle-class women's culture in the late nineteenth-century in the Western world.

It allegorizes the transformation from a matricentric preindustrial culture—Demeter’s realm—to a male-dominated capitalist-industrialist ethos, characterized by growing professionalism and bureaucracy: the realm of patriarchal captivity.”³¹ Donovan reads the action of a story by New England local colorist Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, “Evelina’s Garden,” as deeply symbolic of women’s struggles at this historical point: a young woman is bound by an older woman’s will, which stipulates that she must care for an extraordinary garden and never marry. But she breaks the will, destroying the garden and marrying a man.

The older generation of women, like Demeter, want to guard their daughters within their protective realm and “keep a women’s culture alive,” observes Donovan.

But the younger women were being lured away, primarily, as in the traditional myth of the fall, by the attraction of wider knowledge. For the first time in history, the late nineteenth-century generation of middle-class daughters had the opportunity of entering the world of public, patriarchal discourse. Institutions such as universities, to which women had previously been denied entrance, were gradually opening their doors. Women were adjusting their vistas, looking to broader horizons; the rural matricentral community was beginning to seem too restrictive, too limiting. And yet there was the fear (voiced by the traditional women, the mothers) that the new knowledge the younger women were winning would obliterate older feminine traditions.³²

As Donovan further explains, the tension that developed was between “reason,” or “Apollonian, patriarchal discourse,” and “primitive instincts” or “intuition,” linked to “women’s holistic epistemological traditions, the knowledge of Demeter.”³³ While tracing the progression of these conflictual developments in women’s history from the late Victorian era to the period of sound film far exceeds the scope of this chapter, what I am suggesting here is that the struggle between “Apollonian” worldly public modern feminism and an older, holistic tradition of female knowledge and kinship—an Apollo-Demeter split rather than the more familiar Nietzschean Apollo-Dionysius one—very much continues to animate the representation of women in classical Hollywood. It does not do so, of course, in transparent, literal fashion but rather through the devices of displacement, thematic reorganization, and scrambled codes.

Dorothy Arzner’s important 1933 film *Christopher Strong* is a good example of a displacement of mother-daughter anxieties. The central diegetic conflict occurs within the mind and heart of its heroine, Lady Cynthia Darrington (Katharine Hepburn). She is a singularly single woman, a famous aviatrix whose love for a married man sends her, literally, crashing to Earth. The film never depicts Cynthia as a daughter; neither her mother nor other family members are ever presented in the film; she appears wholly *sui generis*. Yet her close friend,

Monica (Helen Chandler), is very much a troubled daughter figure, indeed, the daughter of Cynthia's married lover, the politician Christopher Strong (Colin Clive). The suffering of Strong's dutiful wife, grieved at once over her daughter Monica's wayward sexuality, affair with a married man, and general unhappiness *and* her own husband's affair with Hepburn's heroine, also is amply represented in the film. Moreover, Hepburn's Cynthia is very much depicted as a maternal figure to the emotionally troubled, sexually hungry Monica. In one scene with erotic undertones, Cynthia embraces her friend and pulls her back from suicidal intentions and despair when the married man *she* loves, who has finally gotten a divorce, threatens to abandon her as the result of an ill-advised tryst.

Christopher Strong's wife, played by the notable character actress Billie Burke (who would play Glinda the Good Witch in the beloved 1939 Victor Fleming film *The Wizard of Oz*), is a most interesting character. While the traditional long-suffering wife, she is depicted with considerably more complexity than usually accompanies such standard roles. In a subtle performance, Burke lets us see the ways in which her character both suffers and attempts to negotiate—without breaking the seal of repression over difficult subjects like adultery and personal unhappiness—her roles as mother and wife. "I'm afraid that motherhood makes us all old-fashioned and intolerant," she says to Cynthia Darrington in an especially striking scene, after her daughter Monica, now to be married, has coldly rejected Cynthia, whose affair with her father Monica has discovered. ("You two have short memories," Cynthia tautly tells her former friend, now pregnant, and her newly divorced, formerly Lothario-like new husband after they have both rejected Cynthia once their own union has been made official.)

Lady Strong's attempt to assuage Cynthia's hurt and anger is particularly notable, as critics such as Judith Mayne and Andrew Britton have noted, considering that she is herself well aware of Cynthia's and her husband's affair.³⁴ The effect of the scene is to depict Lady Strong as *Cynthia's* self-sacrificing, nurturing mother as well, one who implicitly counsels her symbolic daughter against a dubious man and match. In one scene earlier in the film, Lady Strong begs her daughter's still-married lover to break off their as yet unconsummated affair, much to her daughter's chagrin. The Strong family's own difficulties with their daughter—largely unnoticed by the philandering, affable, but indifferent politician Strong, who recalls Zeus's affect in the Demeter-Persephone myth—left largely the mother's problem, this woman's film appears to use the mother-daughter relationship of secondary characters in order to counterbalance and therefore to critique its pointedly motherless heroine's tortured attempts at negotiating modern-woman desires and her own sense of morality.

In *Now, Voyager*, a text to which we will repeatedly turn throughout this study since it so acutely synthesizes its major themes, the stern Mrs. Vale chastises

her daughter Charlotte for deciding not to marry the patrician (and inexpressibly dull) Elliot Livingston. “You’ve never done anything to make your mother proud!” she says, scorning Charlotte. Yet in every way and at all costs, Mrs. Vale has attempted to keep her daughter by her side. Mrs. Vale even throws herself down the stairs, in a desperate attempt to get her daughter’s attention, to get her daughter to stay by her side. (At least, this is the way I interpret an admittedly ambiguous moment in the film.) In an early flashback sequence, triggered by the conversation between Charlotte and Dr. Jaquith in her bedroom in which she both taunts him for believing he can help her and begs for his assistance, we see the young Charlotte (“You wouldn’t have known me then. I was twenty then.”) on board a ship, a much more sensually alive version of herself than the dowdy woman we first encounter. Carrying on an affair with a sailor that is a breach in class as well as sexual propriety, the daring young Charlotte threatens to break free of the older woman’s steely, patrician rule, an attempt at rebellion that her mother, aligning herself with the repressive rule of the ship’s captain, squelches along with her daughter’s heterosexual prospects. The implication is that adult sexuality is the enemy of mother’s love; Mrs. Vale manages to keep her daughter to herself by rendering Charlotte desexualized.

Mrs. Vale’s Demeter-like wish to keep her daughter by her side manifests itself more ardently even than her stringent sense of propriety, proper heterosexual identity, and family tradition. Charlotte’s persephephal wish for freedom—for “independence”—becomes a point the two women explicitly discuss. Once she has been made over, been on her cruise, and finally had a sexual relationship (albeit with a married man), Charlotte returns home, to discover that her mother has had all the contents of her room moved into another. “Mother,” Charlotte explains, “you had no *right* to move my things.” “No right in my own house to do things as I see fit?” her mother responds. Part of the complexity here is that Mrs. Vale has aligned herself with the older patriarchal rule of old money, her husband’s money, while Charlotte has aligned herself with the new patriarchal rule of psychiatry and the modern. This dynamic will be replayed in De Palma’s *Carrie*, another text central to this study, as the religious fundamentalist Mrs. White, who completely identifies with and internalizes patriarchal misogyny, condemns her daughter’s newly awakened sexuality (signified by the onset of menstruation) as sinful and desperately refuses to allow her to attend the prom, symbolic of heterosexual courtship and eventual marriage. Much like Charlotte, Carrie, counseled by a psychiatrist-*manqué* figure, her female gym teacher Miss Collins, wants to break free of the older woman’s world and join the ranks of the Apollonian modern. Seeing Carrie in her beautiful homemade prom dress, Mrs. White seethes, telling her daughter that she can see her “dirty pillows.” “Breasts,” Carrie calmly corrects her mother. “They’re called breasts, Mamma. And every woman has them.” Speaking the new language of

1970s, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* feminism, Carrie challenges her mother's sexual self-renunciation with positive reclamations of female sexuality. But as the film makes clear, ancient forces continue to dominate modern discussions of gender and sexuality—at least insofar as representation will have it.

Ultimately, Charlotte Vale remains ambivalent over the heterosexual prospects once denied her; indeed, in caring for her married lover Jerry's daughter, Tina, Charlotte reinscribes herself within a maternal logic, ending her romantic and erotic attachment to Jerry though not her friendship with him. What becomes powerful and motivating for her is to *be a better mother to Tina than her mother was to her*. In this manner, the film preserves Demeter's wish to hold on to her daughter; here, Charlotte retains a mother-daughter relationship by creating a newly affirming, positive, and, tellingly, nonbiological one. Carrie's blood-drenched hand rising up from the grave to grab her would-be friend Sue Snell's hand at the famous shock-climax of De Palma's film is a lurid joke. It is also a plangent representation of much the same wish—from the now Demeter-like Carrie, joined to her own mother in death, expressing her desperate desire to keep the daughter with her, the unbreakable though forever contested circuit of maternal desire. (Sue Snell is a symbolic and, again, nonbiological daughter.)

It should be noted that in addition to the myth of Demeter and Persephone, other sources could certainly be seen as influences for the themes outlined in this chapter, namely the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea and the fairytale Cinderella, core intertexts for wildly popular, even if execrable, films such as *Pretty Woman* (1990). In some ways, these sources are so obviously being invoked that a discussion of them would be otiose. Let me add that what is relevant is the endurance of such mythic structures in our popular culture, from classical Hollywood very much to the present. Transformation, a key element of the Pygmalion and Galatea myth and Cinderella both, continues to provoke fascination, with manifestations of this theme continuing to have a resonant pop-culture life. As of this writing, the public remains fascinated by the makeover of *Britain's Got Talent* star Susan Boyle, apparently a homely woman given a startling makeover, and apparently much more interesting for this makeover than the vocal talents that initially made her a breakout star in the first place. But female transformations can fascinate going entirely the other direction as well, as stars such as Britney Spears offer themselves up for contemplation in a deliberately unmadeup, deglamorized, this-is-the-real-me version of their appearance.

The myth of Pygmalion and Galatea is a myth about female transformation: Galatea, the woman Pygmalion falls in love with, was once a statue, his own creation. When he falls in love with his statue, Aphrodite, the goddess of love and sex, takes pity on his plight and transforms the statue into a living, breathing, flesh-and-blood woman. Frequently in visual art representations of the myth, Galatea stands on her statue base, her legs still stone, but her

flesh-colored upper body that of a human woman, who bends down to kiss and embrace the enraptured Pygmalion, a kind of secular pieta, evoking a return to the mother as well as a lovers' embrace. Perhaps more important, this myth thematizes male hatred of women. Pygmalion *hates* women, all women; the only woman he ever falls in love with is not a woman at all but his creation, an inert thing. ("Why can't a woman be more like a man?" Henry Higgins laments as he attempts to transform Cockney carouser Eliza Doolittle into a refined and well-spoken woman in *My Fair Lady*, the musical adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, both works key female transformation narratives) There is a quite significant distinction between this myth and a woman's film like *Now, Voyager*. To whatever extent the remade Charlotte Vale is Dr. Jaquith's creation—and it should be remembered that her makeover is as much the creation of her sister-in-law Lisa ("We have a little scheme, your relative and I," Jaquith informs Charlotte at Cascade, before her fateful cruise and transformation)—she is not at any point clearly demarcated as his object of sexual desire, nor does her creation emerge from his hatred of all other women, to say the least. Disrupting the views of Doane and others, Charlotte is, above all else, her own creation. As Jaquith tells her at the conclusion of their first meeting, "You don't need my help."

Ancient Femininities

The Homeric Hymn to Demeter was composed in the late seventh or early sixth century BCE. Picking flowers with her fellow maids one lovely day, Persephone, maiden goddess and the daughter of Demeter, goddess of the harvest, wanders off on her own and plucks a narcissus flower. Disrupting this girls' idyll, Hades, the king of Hell, rises up, grim, black, and terrible on his appositely dark steed, ravishes Persephone, and then abducts her to his underworld realm, the earth splitting open to receive them. In Hell, he makes her his queen, skillfully seducing her into eating pomegranate seeds, which have special properties that ensure her return to Hades and his realm. In the meantime, unspeakable grief seizes Demeter, leading the fertility goddess to wander the world, which she reduces to nuclear-winter infertility in her sorrow and rage. In this story of female loss and change, three powerful themes emerge as precedents for the genres discussed in this study: a mother's grief, tinged with loneliness and rage, over the loss of her daughter; the daughter's ambivalence over her relationship to both her mother and her suitor-husband; and the dark, suspect nature of the suitor-husband, who here abducts, rapes, and imprisons the female whom he forces to become his wife. Variations on this myth recur in the woman's film, specifically in terms of the profound ambivalence over courtship and the mother's loss,

especially in what Mary Ann Doane has called “paranoid women’s films,” such as Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*.³⁵

Helene Foley, editor of a superb edition of the text, notes the resonance feminist thinkers such as Adrienne Rich have found in the myth.³⁶ Foley argues that the *Hymn* “concentrates on the mother’s story rather than the daughter’s,” unlike, I would add, the Freudian myth of femininity.³⁷ In the *Hymn*, notes Foley, “Demeter’s motive for wandering on earth and withdrawing from the gods is *anger at Zeus*.”³⁸ Zeus, both Demeter’s brother and the father of Persephone, exhibits little regard for his daughter, abducted by his own brother, Hades. (Zeus being Demeter’s brother adds to the incestuous family dynamics of the plot.) A theme that circulates throughout the woman’s film and modern horror, the mother’s anger at the loss of her daughter informs films such as *Imitation of Life*, *Now, Voyager*, *Marnie*, *The Exorcist*, *Carrie*, and the *Alien* series. This is a significant point for feminist theory, for it demonstrates that female sorrow can also be an expression of rage, as Tania Modleski has argued.³⁹

For the most part, Foley notes, the *Hymn* refers to Persephone as such only once she has been married; before her marriage, she is “Kore (maiden) or daughter”: “Some scholars have suggested that historically the goddess was an amalgamation of two goddesses, Persephone the goddess of the underworld and Kore the maiden daughter of Demeter . . . The poem may be marking a *change of identity* or Kore’s acquisition of new powers as goddess of the underworld by using the name Persephone.”⁴⁰ Of particular importance to us are the ideas of an essential duality in the young woman’s identity, and that marriage effects a *change* of identity. Moreover, the idea of the young woman’s acquisition of *new powers* through marriage is suggestive. If we can think about both the transformations of cinematic women and the powers they acquire as a result, we can more broadly understand the associations that are made among the constructs of women, change, power, and a sexual awakening of some kind. Marriage looms high in the woman’s film as the transformative institution that confers a normative sexual identity on the woman; sexuality is therefore usually *tied* to marriage in the genre. But it is certainly not always synonymous with it.

After her transformation, one occurring on an emotional level and much more visibly and markedly on a physical one, Charlotte Vale in *Now, Voyager* both embarks on sexual adventure with her married lover Jerry Durrance and finds the strength to challenge her tyrannical mother at last: “I’m not afraid, Mother. I’m not *afraid*, Mother,” she remarks, as surprised by her new powers as her mother is. In Brian De Palma’s *Carrie*, the prom functions as a ritualized version of sexual normalization and courtship—a ritual that will lead to marriage but has its own rules and its own climax: the crowning of prom king and queen. Having been invited to the prom, Carrie can challenge *her* tyrannical mother, who forbids her from attending the prom, a command that

Carrie defies: "I'm going, Mamma. And you can't stop me. And things are gonna *change* around here." The sharpest representation of the Kore-maiden and Persephone-underworld goddess split occurs during the sequence in which Carrie is crowned prom queen and then, as the result of a revenge plot, drenched in pigs' blood. In two matched successive images, Carrie stands on the stage, first as the innocent, virginal prom queen, crowned and holding flowers, Persephone in her garden; then a blood-soaked, hellish apparition, the chthonic underworld queen ready to destroy all those who have so grievously wronged her. As I will show, Carrie's rage is the fulfillment of decades of female fury in Hollywood film.

The myth represents the daughter's ambivalence over both mother's and husband's love and over her conflictual negotiation of her own desire. Once recalcitrant Zeus finally begins to understand the consequences of Demeter's rage—the cessation of all growth and futurity on Earth—he pleads, through an intermediary, with Demeter to restore Earth to its blooming fecundity and to rejoin the company of the gods, which pleas she stonily ignores. Finally, Zeus commands Hades to relinquish Persephone to her mother. Craftily, the underworld god agrees, but not without a cunning plan to ensure Persephone's return to him: "Go, Persephone, to the side of your dark-robed mother," he commands, while also assuring her that he will not be "an unsuitable spouse," and also that she will "possess the greatest honors among the gods," and that there "will be punishment forevermore for those wrongdoers / who fail to appease your power with sacrifices."⁴¹ Persephone's reaction is of great interest:

Thus he spoke and thoughtful Persephone rejoiced.
Eagerly she leapt for joy. But he gave her to eat
a honey-sweet pomegranate seed, stealthily passing it
around her, lest she once more stay forever
by the side of revered Demeter of the dark robe. (370–75)

As Foley notes, Persephone is here for the first time called "thoughtful," "circumspect," or "intelligent," which may indicate "an acquisition of maturity." Most relevantly for our purposes, Foley remarks that Persephone's leaping for joy is an essentially ambiguous moment in the poem, one that leaves unresolved the question of "whether Persephone leaps up joyfully because she is leaving to see her mother, because Hades has promised honors to her, or both. At line 411," Foley adds, "Persephone affirms the first motive (she does not mention the honors)."⁴²

The daughter's essential ambivalence over her relationship to her mother is, of course, the defining theme of Freud's treatment of female psychosexual development as well as maturation into adult sexuality, and of later psychoanalytic

critics such as Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, who views the mother-daughter relationship as locked in enmity, the daughter striving above all else to break free of the mother's tyrannical hold.⁴³ The darkness of this view of female relationships has a precedent in the *Hymn*, but the plangency of the love between mother and daughter is also evoked. As a mirror for this conflicted relationship, the young woman's relationship to marriage, the husband, and her own sexuality (in heterosexual terms) is equally ambiguous and ambivalent, again a theme that runs throughout the Freudian account, in which the wife's experience of her husband recalls her childhood experience of her mother (indeed, the husband is merely the mother's double).

Writing in the essay collection on the myth that she also edits, *The Long Journey Home*, Christine Downing discusses the ritual called the Thesmophoria, the major ritual associated with Demeter alone, in contrast to the Eleusinian Mysteries, where Demeter and Persephone are worshipped together as "The Two Goddesses."⁴⁴ As Downing observes, drawing on Walter Burkert's magisterial study *Greek Religion*,⁴⁵ the Thesmophoria, "an extremely ancient festival," gave women an opportunity to celebrate on their own and without the company of men. Specifically, the ritual gave women the opportunity to express their anger, contempt, and derision toward men through obscene gestures and songs in which they aggressively, bawdily mocked their male counterparts. It wasn't all wild excess, however: "This temporary dissolution of marital bonds may have strengthened marriage by providing a ritual outlet for expressing frustration, grief, and anger." The core of the festival was the founding of an exclusive community of women, one that dissolved the family and segregated the sexes. Heterosexual sexual abstinence was a prerequisite.

On the first day pigs were sacrificed to commemorate the death/rape of Persephone (according to the myth, a herd of swine as well as the maiden were swallowed up in the chasm that appeared when the maiden plucked the narcissus) and then tossed down into a serpent-filled chamber. Later the rotten flesh (perhaps the remnants of the previous year's sacrifice) was brought up from the chasm and mixed with seed corn. In addition to its agrarian meaning, this part of the ritual served as a reminder of the inescapability of loss and grief. During the second day, the women fasted; they sat on the ground in remembrance of grieving Demeter . . . and shared their grief with one another. The women ate pomegranates, whose juice symbolized blood, whose fallen pips belonged to the dead. Their hostility to men is expressed in highly exaggerated form; there are even traditions attesting that the women castrated men who tried to spy on the festival. There was a real indulgence of obscenity and indecent speech (reminiscent of Baubo's self-delighting vulgarity). A late source reveals that the women worshipped a representation of the female pudenda, and at least in Sicily cakes of this shape were baked and eaten.⁴⁶

Baubo, an aged dry nurse, performs a lewd dance for the hopelessly grieving Demeter, in which the crone takes off her clothes, spreads her legs, and exposes her vagina to the distraught goddess. Unexpectedly, this triumphantly obscene performance succeeds in making Demeter laugh, a cathartic release through bawdy theatrics of defiant female self-pleasure. For Baubo herself is a mother figure, one not ashamed of her aged body but who revels in it and her still-potent sexuality. As Downing notes, “The ritual put considerable emphasis on sexuality and conception—but not on intercourse, not on the male role.”⁴⁷

For our purposes, the fusions of carnality and grief, of corporeality and communal ritual, of female sexual brazenness and revulsion against men and masculinity, are highly suggestive. In the woman’s film, reflective of the period in American culture in which the genre thrived, images of motherhood rarely ever transgressed to such extremes—the piety and the policing role of mothers only increased throughout the classical Hollywood decades. Nevertheless, there were some examples of a bawdy maternal femininity—Barbara Stanwyck’s titular role in King Vidor’s famous 1937 *Stella Dallas* immediately springs to mind: a coarse, raucous woman whose affect expresses her working-class sensibility and identity; class conflict intercedes, as the lowborn Stella gives up her daughter at the tear-jerking climax so that she can enter the upper-class world Stella has so brazenly flouted throughout the film. Symbolic mother figures, however, abound in the woman’s film. The tough-minded, savvy, sexually knowing older women who counsel, look after, and support, with either wisecracks or platitudes, the heroines of innumerable woman’s films—Jean Dixon in *Sadie McKee* (Clarence Brown, 1934); Mayo Methot in *Marked Woman* (Lloyd Bacon, 1937); Fay Bainter in *Jezebel* (William Wyler, 1938); Eve Arden in *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945), younger than the film’s star but typed as the “aunt” figure; Gladys George in *Flamingo Road* (Michael Curtiz, 1949); Agnes Moorehead in the Douglas Sirk melodramas of the 1950s starring Rock Hudson and Jane Wyman. I would also add Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind*—stand-in for Baubo and sometimes for Baubo and grieving Demeter at once. Plainly, certain women-centered films also create an atmosphere of female exclusivity, most prominently *The Women* (George Cukor, 1939), with no male actors in it, and its remake *The Opposite Sex* (David Miller, 1956), and films such as *Little Women* (George Cukor, 1933), *Stage Door* (Gregory La Cava, 1937), and *Marked Woman* and, I would again add, the female-centered *Gone with the Wind*. While a strong maternal presence does not enter the narrative of several woman’s films, in several others the central struggle is between a mother and daughter: *Stella Dallas*, *Imitation of Life* (both versions), *Now, Voyager*, *Mildred Pierce*, *Peyton Place*, and, indirectly, *The Heiress*, in which the heroine is constantly compared to her dead mother, and, symbolically, in *Rebecca*, in which the heroine is constantly being compared to her dead predecessor. *Now*,

Voyager was far from the only Davis film to explore this theme. *The Old Maid* (1939) and *The Great Lie* (1941), significant examples to Andrew Britton of the “radicalism of the woman’s film,” also foreground mother-daughter relationships, explicitly in *The Old Maid* and *Now, Voyager*, less obviously but just as resonantly in *The Great Lie*.

Mick La Salle argues that after the 1930s, the bawdiness of American cinematic women would disappear.⁴⁸ What, in comparison to 1930s films, 1940s film lose—spontaneity, wit, looseness—they gain in depth and complexity and a willingness to explore dark psychosexual terrain. The darkness of 1940s films lies, to a considerable extent and beyond the obvious influence of film noir aesthetics, in their willingness to explore the female potential for violence in all of its forms, as I will discuss later in this chapter. Certainly, the grim seriousness of mother-daughter relationships when they are represented in 1940s film preserves the sadness and often the rage without any of the bawdiness of these ancient feminine myths and rituals. One thinks of how utterly unleavened by humor the caustic relationship between mother and daughter is in films such as *Now, Voyager*, *Mildred Pierce*, and, later and especially, Hitchcock’s *Marnie* (1964). The largely unsmiling mother of these films preserves Demeter’s inconsolable anger while never allowing for emotional or sexual release.

Race and the Maternal

“Relatively few Hollywood films make the Mother central, relegating her, rather, to the periphery of a narrative focused on a husband, son, or daughter,” notes E. Ann Kaplan, arguing that Hollywood cinema, as does psychoanalysis, perpetuates oppressive patriarchal myths.⁴⁹ I argue that when the mother is not explicitly present in the woman’s film, her presence manifests itself in displaced form. One of the woman’s film’s chief strategies of displacement—of marking and making visible what is not explicitly represented—was to make the figure of the African American woman the super sign of maternity and suffering, the ultimate symbolic mother and an evocation of Demeter. The black woman’s function in the white female melodrama was to fill a particular void: the mother missing from narratives of female independence. The figure of the Mammy, prevalent in American pop culture at this time, embodied the constricted yet resonant role black women played in the woman’s film and continues to raise difficult questions about what, if any, positive value lies within this caricature of black womanhood. As Andrea S. Walsh writes, “The racism of both the studios and the largely white audience suppressed the possibility of women’s films that would sensitively portray the minority female experience.”⁵⁰

Mary Ann Doane describes the situation this way:

Black servants haunt the diegeses of films like *The Great Lie* . . . Female black servants in particular act to double and hence reinforce the maternal function . . . the locus of otherness and an instinctive and unspecifiable form of maternal knowledge . . . a kind of meta-mother. This representation . . . [is] fully consistent with psychological theories of the 1940s which held that the black woman signified the “primitive essence of mother-love.” Perceived as closer to the earth and to nature and more fully excluded from the social contract than the white woman, the black woman personifies more explicitly the situation of the mother, and her presence, on the margins of the text, is a significant component of many maternal melodramas.⁵¹

I would add to Doane’s helpful account that McDaniel’s Mammy also signifies a fount of maternal love that *no* woman—no other human—could match. So boundless, so selfless, and so purely devotional, the love from the Mammy, “primitive” and essential, engulfs and envelops the isolate modern woman, surrounding her with a love that functions as shield against and also as symbol of her own powerlessness.

I would argue that the 1930s were a more responsive period for the representation of black femininity, especially in terms of the maternal, than subsequent decades in the studio era. The famous *Imitation of Life* (John M. Stahl, 1934) is the exemplary instance of this responsiveness. For all of its considerable lapses—such as its relegation of the black woman to the role of servant even in a business setting enabled by her (the pancake recipe that her white business partner makes famous)—the film records racial anxieties with sensitivity and sympathy, and, in whatever limited fashion, courageously depicts the possibility of friendship between women of different racial and social categories. The brilliant, icy 1959 Douglas Sirk remake, starring Lana Turner and Juanita Moore, though a much more clinical dissection of the woman’s film genre, has an equal emotional power. The woman’s film was, for Hollywood, a radical genre in that it made strong (white) women and their concerns central. Yet, especially by the 1940s, it, too, generally made the minority female experience less than central, a complex imaginative failure that deserves further treatment.⁵²

While I will often be reading the woman’s film positively throughout this book, this entire discussion is haunted by the sorrowful, confusing, minoritized presence of the black woman—the thematic ghost of Toni Morrison’s almost unbearably affecting 2009 novel *A Mercy*, similarly concerned with black female maternal figures who hover in the background—in classical Hollywood (a minoritizing that exists well into modern horror). For our purposes, the black woman would appear to embody the idea of some kind of prior knowledge—and grief—about femininity and specifically about the mother’s loss of her child, slavery and its dissolution of the family obvious precedents. In terms of a precedent for the suffering and vexations of white women within modernity,

the myth of Demeter and Persephone synthesizes the disparate but interrelated themes and tensions within the representation of femininity—always raced as white—in classical Hollywood. While for reasons of economy I will be referring to white middle-class women when I use terms like “women” in this book, and while racism is not the chief subject of this particular study, it should be clear that any discussion of Hollywood whiteness comes at the expense of the generations of nonwhite populations in and out of Hollywood who have suffered from its overt as well as unconscious racism. As Molly Haskell has written, “The portrayal of blacks from the silents to the sixties is one extended blot on the white conscience, with Hattie McDaniel and her ilk playing maids and happy darkies.”⁵³ As I am suggesting, in this capacity they also played the mother to the wayward daughters of classical Hollywood.

Violence, Sexual Ambivalence, and Mother-Right

The woman's film, especially in the tense 1940s, does not often indulge in the bawdiness of ancient female rituals like the Thesmophoria. But the element of the ancient feminine rituals that the films *do* preserve is their intense potential for violence, which comes through in certain symbolic motifs and in the emergence of the figure of the Fury. The theme of violence sutures the discontinuities while synthesizing the powerful connections between the genres of woman's film and horror. “Miss Julie,” her admirer George Brent asks her, “are you dressed up for a hog-killing party?” This line from Bette Davis's *Jezebel* (1938, and her second Oscar) synthesizes the relationship between the woman's film and modern horror as it recalls the Thesmophoria, one of the elements of which involved throwing pigs into pits filled with snakes. Julie Marsden, the headstrong Southern belle in 1852 New Orleans played by Davis in the film, wants to teach her fiancé, Preston Dillard (“Pres”), played by Henry Fonda, a lesson about keeping her waiting. She gets her revenge by dressing up in a red dress for the Olympus Ball, a scandalous scarlet woman at a ritualistic event for maiden girls all dressed in white.

Julie's disastrous experience at the Olympus Ball, her red dress a violation of all social customs and an emblem of her own passion, finds its modern-horror analog in De Palma's *Carrie*, in which telekinetic abused Carrie White's (Sissy Spacek) handmade pink dress transforms into a blood-soaked emblem of her pain and fury. Julie Marsden's red dress fit for a “hog-killing party” becomes Carrie's red dress at the prom, literally soaked in pigs' blood. Just as Julie's appearance disrupts the Olympus Ball, Carrie's humiliation, having the pigs' blood dumped upon her in her moment of triumph as the prom queen, transforms the prom from a rite of passage into a pageant of mayhem and death. Both the Olympus Ball and the prom are ritualistic events meant to join together the

heterosexual couple and confer upon them the public social acceptance that will ensure reproductive futurity. The films grotesquely invert these rituals, putting their heroines into red dresses—one donned volitionally, the other against the woman's will—that become emblems of female suffering and capacity for vengeful violence. Both films, too, take the theme of transformation to a deeper level by having their heroines garb themselves in a purifying white (or, in *Carrie*'s case, Virgin Mary blue) that fails to restore their lost innocence and pride. When Pres, who breaks off his engagement to Julie, returns after a year, Bette Davis appears in a breathtaking white dress, kneeling before him, “humbly begging” him for forgiveness (he can offer that, but not marriage, being now married to a stiff, bland Northern woman, played by Margaret Lindsay).

After her defilement and vengeful killing spree, *Carrie* returns to the home she shares with her mother, a crazed religious fundamentalist named Margaret White (Piper Laurie). Bathing herself and weeping as she washes off the blood, *Carrie* attempts to cleanse the hell off her body, a Persephone who has climbed out of the underworld and returned to her mother. But this mother wants to send her daughter back to hell. “Red. I might have known it would be red,” *Carrie*'s mother, revealing the feverish lunacy of her own internalized misogyny, had told *Carrie* before she left for the prom in the lovely pink dress she made herself. The prom fulfills her mother's worst prophecies by transforming *Carrie*'s pink freshness into carnal carmine. *Carrie* puts on a soft blue-green Virgin Mary robe and finds her mother, in a white robe that signifies her own attempted purification, waiting for her. In an exquisite moment, her mother holds her, finally appearing to be giving her the love and affection *Carrie* has always craved. But the embrace is a fatal one, as Margaret plunges a long, phallic knife into *Carrie*'s body. The white robe the mother wears signals not her purification but her transformation into an absolutist emotional state—voiding herself of all feeling toward her daughter so that she can destroy her. We will turn to a fuller analysis of *Carrie* in Chapter 6, but let me anticipate my argument about that film here by suggesting that it subjects the mother-daughter themes of the woman's film to rigorous critique while also thematizing the harrowing trauma at the core of the Demeter-Persephone myth through its formal elaboration on splitting: split images, split screens, split emotional ties.

Red, at once the color of trauma, female sexuality, and suffering, saturates the myth through the symbol of the pomegranate Hades tricks Persephone into eating and thereby becoming his forever, at least for part of every year. As Ellen Handler Spitz observes in her psychoanalytic reading of the myth, among the many meanings of the pomegranate, it symbolizes “heterosexual union with its seeds and blood-red juice.”⁵⁴ Hitchcock's *Marnie* turns the pomegranate's sexual import into expressionistic symbolism, as scarlet hues suffuse the scenes in which *Marnie* comes into contact with the color red. Given that the myth

concerns itself as much with the woman's passage into adult heterosexual sexuality, what is especially striking about it is the depth of the ambivalence it conveys toward heterosexual union, institutionalized then as now by marriage. So many women's films as well as modern horror films preserve and convey this ambivalence. For a woman who wishes so desperately to marry her increasingly unattainable fiancé, Julie Marsden is spectacularly effective at pushing him away. In *Dark Victory* (Edmund Goulding, 1939), death intercedes—like the god Hades himself—in marriage on Earth, allowing Judith Traherne (Bette Davis) the briefest earthly marriage to the oncologist who tries and fails to save her life. Mildred Pierce (Joan Crawford) bakes pies obsessively as if to deflect any physical attention from her husband, and then proceeds to marry a man she “isn't exactly in love with” only to win back the true object of her desire, her daughter. Charlotte Vale famously chides her rejected, married lover to forget happiness (“Oh, Jerry, don't let's ask for the moon. We have the stars.”). In an extraordinary moment in Nicholas Ray's Freudian feminist western, the titular character of the 1954 *Johnny Guitar* demands that Joan Crawford's icy heroine tell him how much she still loves and pines for him; she repeats his own words back to him at his command, but with the rote, monotone impersonality of an android. The horror films of the classical Hollywood period amply convey this same sexual ambivalence, just as they spectacularly showcase, by deliriously heightening, the theme of transformation. *Cat People* (Jacques Tourneur, 1942), the same director's *I Walked with a Zombie*, from the following year, and Roger Corman's 1960 *The Wasp Woman* can each be read as elaborate strategies for deferring heterosexual union, figuring such unions as the ravishment of males by monstrous, shape-shifting women.

These horror films all present a brutal image of the mother, the archaic mother who threatens to devour and reengulf the subject that Barbara Creed calls the monstrous-feminine. Yet classical Hollywood also represents the image of the grieving mother, the mother who wishes to reclaim her daughter. Hard-bitten Mrs. Vale in *Now, Voyager* wants to keep her daughter by her side even as she chastises her for being behaviorally and socially inadequate; Joan Crawford's Mildred Pierce will do anything to keep her venal daughter Veda (Ann Blyth) by her side. More often than not, however, the films either obscure or displace this maternal grief and, at times, rage, focusing, as I have been arguing, on the independent woman as if she existed within a world of her own, *sui generis*.

The Kindly Ones

The Demeter-Persephone myth is a welter of anxieties that get redistributed in the woman's film, shards of the myth resurfacing in jagged, surprising form throughout the years in which the genre thrived. The daughter's anxieties over

marriage, the mother's grief and rage over the loss of her daughter, the disturbingly dark image of the husband-suitor all materialize at various points and in distinct ways in the woman's film. One of the central aspects of the myth and the female rituals that attended it is, I have been suggesting, the potential for female violence. Demeter's grief emerges as retributive wrath against the world itself, and Persephone, so vulnerable and violated, becomes herself the queen of the underworld. Related to these elements of the myth and to the late-nineteenth-century preoccupation with ancient, powerful femininities, the mythic personages known as the Furies make a profound, puzzling reappearance in classical Hollywood film. In classical mythology, the Furies, or Erinyes, sometimes euphemistically referred to as the Eumenides, or the "kindly ones," implacably avenge the murdered; they can be understood as the energies and tensions left unresolved after a murder. In Hollywood film, the Fury murders as well as avenges. The Fury is the most violent metaphor of the phenomenon I refer to as transformation in the woman's film.

The late-nineteenth-century interest in the myth of Demeter and Persephone was one aspect of a much larger, wider international preoccupation with the maternal in the ancient world, a belief—which has not been historically substantiated—in ancient matriarchal orders. This belief reaches its chief expression in Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, first published in 1948 and frequently revised, a highly popular work though repudiated by classicists well into the present day. The writings of J. J. Bachofen (1815–87), a contemporary of Nietzsche, Hegel, and Marx and Engels, exemplify the nineteenth-century preoccupation with these themes. Writing long before the discovery of a great deal of new archaeological evidence in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth that would considerably alter our views of the classical world, Bachofen nevertheless writes about ancient deities such as the Furies with an eloquence and suggestive power that is highly relevant to the present discussion. The Furies figure prominently in Aeschylus's tragic trilogy known as *The Oresteia*, which consists of three plays: *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*. Agamemnon kills his daughter Iphigenia, in order to offer her as a sacrifice to the gods, thereby augmenting the success of the Greek side of the Trojan War. Clytemnestra, his wife, livid with grief over what her husband has done to their daughter, murders him; but then their son Orestes kills his mother for having killed his father, an act of matricide endorsed by Orestes's sister, Electra, who allies herself with her brother. Pursued by the Furies for his crime, Orestes finally stands trial, but no verdict can be reached. Acting as the deciding vote, the goddess of war and wisdom, Athena, appears and decides on behalf of Orestes, for, as this masculinized goddess, born not from woman but from her father Zeus's head, says, she sides with the male in all matters. Athena's function in this trilogy, which can be read as the formation of the modern "impersonal"

justice system, the institutionalization of Western misogyny, or both at once, will be discussed again in the last chapter.

If psychoanalysis and Hollywood film, the two powerful new mythologies of modernism, relegate mother-right once again to the sidelines, establishing their own new Law of the Father, the presence in both systems of powerful, wrathful, unappeasable female deities marks the return of a silenced but enduringly potent female rage and sorrow, one impossible to ignore or ameliorate. Freud's preoedipal phallic mother, simultaneously castrated and ithyphallic Medusa, and Death-Mother hover over his woman-denying writings, as do the often occluded yet palpable grieving, angry mothers and the violent, avenging Furies of Hollywood film. In the next sections, I elaborate on my understanding of the significance of the Fury as well as the trope of female transformation in the woman's film and then in modern horror.

The Dream Work of Transformation

The Demeter-Persephone myth treats marriage as death—a social and spiritual death for both the mother and the daughter. The myth thematizes female transformation, through Demeter's metamorphosis from fertility goddess to death-dealing force of winter and lifelessness, and Persephone's transformation from sweet, flower-plucking, virginal maiden to chthonic queen. The question of marriage, the ultimate force of transformation, is at times violently interrogated in the woman's film, as if in dialogue with this ancient myth. While the films foreground a change in the woman's social situation through the looming, undecided, suspenseful marriage plot, they also more complexly and hauntingly thematize this change through *metaphors of transformation*. For my purposes, transformation connotes a metamorphosis that allegorizes, complements, or otherwise signifies changes on any number of physical, social, class, emotional, sometimes even biological levels, as well as simply stands in for itself, as an outwardly registered sign of change. Indeed, this aspect of the representation of women in the cinema is so frequent and so wide ranging as to defy any kind of classification. One thinks of noteworthy films of the past two decades as varied as *Pretty Woman*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Death Becomes Her*, *Mulholland Drive*, *The Mirror Has Two Faces*, *The Princess Diaries*, *Mean Girls*, *Julie and Julia*; of iconic films like *My Fair Lady* or *Cleopatra* or *Grease*. One thinks as well of contemporary female stars ranging from Meryl Streep to Madonna to Lady Gaga, who make their ability to transform again and again their chief feat. Taking the sheer gamut of Hollywood history into consideration, the theme of female transformation seems to be everywhere.

Indeed, transformation would appear to be embedded in the logic of dramatic narrative itself—characters must grow and change over the course of

the film, as any manual or class would instruct a budding screenwriter. Moreover, not only the mythology but the brute realities of the Hollywood industry foreground transformation on every level, perhaps especially in classical Hollywood, as Basinger details in *The Star Machine*.⁵⁵ The often grueling process of transforming average people into fabulously glamorous movie stars was an often agonizing physical as well as emotional process. By limiting the genres and the particular kinds of transformation that occur in them in this book, and by focusing on gender and sexuality, I am attempting to get at a specific repertoire of female identities that itself undergoes a transformation (on the level of genre) while being repurposed.

Physical change emerges as at once the most dramatically visible and the most mysterious of the kinds of transformation that occur in the woman's film. This physical change can occur as a result of costuming or fashions, or on a corporeal level, and very often both at once. The heroines of Dorothy Arzner's films *Christopher Strong* (1933) and *The Bride Wore Red* (1937) don numerous distinct outfits, each of which registers some kind of emotional change or development in the lives of their heroines. In *Christopher Strong*, Hepburn's heroine Lady Cynthia Darrington, an aviatrix, at one point emerges at a physically elevated height from which we gaze at her from a low angle—a vantage point we share with her married lover—in a silver-lamé dress complete with a cap from which reproduced insect antennae playfully protrude. Cynthia's lover, the titular character, likens her to a moth in this moment, and the plane she flies is nicknamed *The Silver Moth*. A complex chain of signifiers emerges: woman-moth-plane. The dress, outré though it is, signifies something metaphorically rich and resonant about her character, especially in terms of her complex negotiation of her own sexual desires and with marriage, propriety, and sexual morality, as well as her relationships to other women—her married lover's daughter, Monica, who is her friend, and his wife, revealed to be a vulnerable and sympathetic woman, as is not always the fashion in such cinematic scenarios. Hepburn's outfit in this scene changes how we look at her character just as it registers change. Moreover, the way in which Arzner frames the scene visually demands that we notice the costume as a visual event, further encouraging us to see it as a symbolic. Far from a superficial or throwaway effect, Hepburn's costume change truly is significant to this film and its thematic preoccupations, and therefore to the genre and its preoccupations as well.

I must disagree, then, with Judith Mayne about this dress. "At no other moment in the film," she writes, "is Cynthia so obviously in costume (and so incredibly silly-looking), and this is precisely the moment when Christopher's attraction to Cynthia is announced. There is no small irony in the fact that the two scenes that comprise the most visible declaration of heterosexual love—this one, in which she looks like a cybernetic insect, and the 'bracelet scene' [in

which Christopher tells her to give up flying]—are the most ironic and parodic scenes in the film.”⁵⁶ While I agree with Mayne that Arzner finds numerous ways of ironically undercutting the heterosexual relationship central to this film, I believe Cynthia’s outfit has different valences. The very obviousness, the theatricality of her outfit immediately places it and the woman within it outside of “realistic” narrative. It calls attention to the symbolic-thematic interests of the narrative and to the heroine’s larger-than-life symbolic value, for this and other woman’s films are always about “woman” as much as they are about the heroine. Especially interesting coming from a lesbian director, this scene invites us to contemplate the uncanniness of woman as a concept as well as the sex appeal of this uncanniness—a sex appeal that exceeds the boundaries of heterosexual typing and desire. One thinks of Donna Haraway’s famous statement, “I’d rather be a cyborg than a woman.” Cynthia’s moth outfit makes her not only cybernetic but also a machine capable of taking flight, a woman version of the plane she flies. If the plane phallically symbolizes the active quality of her propulsive desires, the moth outfit, linked to the plane as a symbol of the character, signifies desire *itself*, an unclassifiable force with its own momentum: moth to the flame. Far from being silly, the moth outfit is a sophisticated index of the gendered and sexual concerns of the film.

The almost metaphysical aspect of transformation in the films, related to and also surpassing the realistic concerns of social practice that marriage embodies, gives them an uncanniness, a dream power that transforms them from predictable genre pieces into works far less predictable, as well as enduringly disturbing. When we first meet Charlotte Vale, with her thickly unkempt hair, thick eyebrows, droopy spectacles, and heavy, unattractive dress, she confronts us with her ugliness, a caterpillar woman in the chrysalis of her own despair. That she must also be the object of the collectively imprisoning gaze of her pitiless mother, scheming niece, compassionate sister-in-law, and the summoned Dr. Jaquith signifies her abjection, her pinned-insect powerlessness. In the typically elliptical fashion of films of the period, Charlotte, committed to the sanitarium, undergoes remarkable changes in a short expanse of time, but the most notable aspect of her fairytale makeover from ugly duckling to beautiful swan is that emotionally and psychically she still *feels* like the former while appearing as the latter. A jagged discontinuity between her physical transformation and her emotional life pointedly exists. When she makes her famous entrance on the ship as her newly transformed, glamorous self, once again the object of a collective gaze, both Davis’s performance and Irving Rapper’s direction create a startling effect—a woman whose beauty is purely a mask, an artifice she inhabits but toward which she feels ambivalent. The film creates a complex female subjectivity that uneasily negotiates between surface and depth, physical form and psychic life, social appraisal and inward perception.

In another Davis film, *Beyond the Forest*, the trapped small-town Rosa Moline, acutely suffering from Bovarism, longs to escape to the big city of Chicago, a desire amplified by Max Steiner's incorporation of the famous song "Chicago, Chicago" into his own score, which characteristically saturates the melodrama. Chicago emerges as the symbol of freedom and escape, but as such a symbol it loses its specificity and becomes much more inscrutable over the course of the film. By the end, when the dying Rosa staggers toward the train that will take her to the mythic urban space, and Steiner's furious "Chicago" theme accompanies her lurching progress, the film has so completely denatured the ideas of the city, the escape, and the woman desperate for change, which has itself transformed into some elusive, bewildering goal that far exceeds geographical relocation, we no longer have any clear idea what we're watching. Is this Rosa's gallant last attempt to make the change she longs for, the self-annihilating passion of a woman hell-bent on destroying herself, or a paradoxical figure of simultaneous liberation and entrapment? The films treat the woman's desire for transformation both empathetically and ambivalently, by making the very concept of transformation troublingly, inscrutably opaque. In these ways, *Beyond the Forest* prefigures the treatment of the status-seeking heroine Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Coming out of a "poor white trash background," as the serial killer-cannibal psychiatrist Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) mercilessly reminds her, Clarice will do just about anything to get ahead, to become an FBI agent and whatever new social role comes with this title. "You're so ambitious," Lecter observes, marveling at her and chiding her at once. While the film ensures Clarice's access to a new social and cultural status, and sympathetically treats her ambitions, its ultimate disposition toward her is, in keeping with the aforementioned examples of the woman's film, highly ambivalent, as the climax evinces: right after the FBI-agent graduation ceremony in which she is honored with the badge for which she has so arduously striven, Clarice receives a phone call from Dr. Lecter. After congratulating her and informing her that he has no plans to "call on her," advising her to do the same for him, Dr. Lecter abandons her on the other end of a phone call, leaving her to repeat his name again and again. The queer monster escapes her grasp (compared to Lecter, the gender-bending Jame Gumb, the serial killer Clarice pursues and slays, is small potatoes), leaving her to the icy confines of the patriarchal symbolic order she has now finally joined. And as in *Christopher Strong* and *Now, Voyager*, the winged insect motif—here in the form of the death's-head moths that Jame Gumb uses as his serial killer profile—symbolizes the longing for transformation and its poignant, terrifying urgency not just for the serial killers but for the heroine. (The queer typing of the heroine as well as the serial killer will be taken up at length in the last chapter.)

Now, Voyager never deploys tropes of transformation simplistically. Certainly it never does so in a crude effort to objectify its heroine sexually. Whatever the film's investments in conventional ideals of female beauty, for a classical Hollywood film it is also remarkably distant toward these ideals. When the young, troubled Tina (Janis Wilson), unloved by her own mother, complains to Charlotte about not being attractive, Charlotte responds, "But who wants that kind of prettiness?" encouraging Tina to strive for a "kind of beauty" that comes from within. One might respond that it is Charlotte herself who has wanted precisely that kind of prettiness, but the film makes it obvious that her makeover occurs as a result of her sister-in-law Lisa and Dr. Jaquith's "scheme," rather than by Charlotte's own design.

When the newly physically transformed Charlotte appears on the ship, the film appears to indulge in the sexual objectification of women in classical Hollywood theorized by Laura Mulvey's 1975 article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" and Mary Ann Doane's work. The camera begins at her exquisitely shoe-clad feet and rises up over body to her veiled face. But while Rapper's camera movement corresponds to convention, the *emotional* movement of the film resists it, taking the viewer's responses in an antithetical direction. What we feel as we watch, precisely at this moment that should signify the elation and the triumph of the normative order's restoration—woman as properly sexualized site of desire and specular fascination—is neither elation nor triumph, but anxiety: we share in Charlotte's vulnerability and in her experience of being assaulted by the gaze. She recalls Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, the grievously visible woman scorned and shamed by the ravenous crowd, but Charlotte, as Davis plays her, has none of the haughty defiance Hawthorne's heroine uses to deflect attention from her vulnerability; rather, Charlotte experiences her own physical identity as a kind of costume, something borrowed, not her own, a body indistinguishable from the dresses lent to her by her relative Renée Beauchamp, tellingly characterized as a famous impersonator.

Charlotte has more in common with the protagonist of Hawthorne's short story "The Minister's Black Veil," who uses his titular apparatus to hide his face from the world. Here, Charlotte's veil signifies the disparity between her corporeality—in either its socially sanctioned or its socially abnegated form—and her psychic reality. That the transformations that occur frequently in the woman's film usually occur first on a corporeal level, and that it is precisely such physical transformations that will recur in modern horror, is significant. Transformation in *Now, Voyager* signifies impersonation as much as change, and impersonation at a remove that suggests a view of identity and desire as a *mise-en-abîme*, an endless hall of mirrors, an abyssal experience of self, transforming into nonself.

The Fury of Transformation

Perhaps most ambivalently of all, Catherine Sloper's transformation in *The Heiress* signifies both her triumphant self-realization and her metamorphosis into monstrosity. Catherine, as the equally shy and abused Carrie will after her, transforms into a Fury. A prime example of the way that the woman's film could subject the marriage question to violent interrogation, William Wyler's film is a cinematic version of the stage play based on the late-nineteenth-century novel *Washington Square* by Henry James. In this austere and vividly painful work, the young, deeply shy Catherine Sloper (Olivia de Havilland), whose father, the physician Austin Sloper (Ralph Richardson), finds her a woefully inadequate substitute for her beautiful, witty dead mother, falls in love with a charming, handsome mercenary youth, Morris Townsend (indelibly played by Montgomery Clift), interested only in her money. Dr. Sloper's insightful sister warns him that he has idealized his wife to the point that no one could ever compare with her, certainly not the shy Catherine, whom Dr. Sloper insists on portraying as "an unmarriageable girl." Complicatedly, while Dr. Sloper refuses to allow Morris to take advantage of his daughter, he does so not from paternal love but from contempt for socially awkward Catherine's lack of grace and finesse. It's only Catherine's money that Morris craves. "You have nothing else!" bellows Dr. Sloper in one stinging exchange, except for one thing: "You embroider—neatly."

After her cold, tyrannical father castigates her thus for her near total lack of worth, save her money and talent for needlework, Catherine slumps into her chair and responds, in a newly deep, self-aware voice, "What a *terrible* thing to say to me." Subtly, the film suggests that Catherine's dark transformation into a force of wrath carries with it a gender transformation as well—her voice, demeanor, and dress will become increasingly harder, tougher, in a word, masculine. Shortly after this confrontation, Dr. Sloper falls ill. When he rises out of bed to see Catherine, he finds she has been distraught. He had been correct in his assumptions: Morris ditches Catherine once he learns she will not inherit her father's money (not that she will be penniless—she still has her mother's ten thousand a year, no paltry sum, but then again not the thirty thousand of Morris's hopes). In this remarkable scene, the tables traumatically turn: now it is Dr. Sloper who is the pitiable one, Catherine the unflinchingly blunt and unforgiving one. Whatever grief she has endured over Morris's betrayal has rendered her resolutely purposeful and implacable. When Catherine threatens to use her father's reoffered money to "buy" Morris, Dr. Sloper pathetically threatens, "I shall have to alter my will!" Her response is swift and exact: "You should! You should do it immediately!" Despite his agitation, he can't bear to disinherit her. When she taunts him by telling him she may squander his money, and he

acknowledges that he doesn't have any idea what she will do with her inheritance, she amplifies his sense with almost savage force, emphasizing his imminent death from illness: "That's right, Father. You'll *never* know—will you?" "You have found a tongue at last, Catherine," Dr. Sloper says during the scene, "if only to say such terrible things to me."

Cinematically, William Wyler represents Catherine Sloper's transformation into Fury in *The Heiress* through three dramatic flights up the stairs from a high angle: first, Catharine giddily racing up the stairs to tell her Aunt Penniman (Miriam Hopkins, one of the major stars of the 1930s) news of her engagement; second, Catharine's death-march-like procession up the stairs when she realizes Morris has indeed deserted her; third, the oddly elated climb after she tricks Morris, returned several months after her father's death, into believing that she will accept him. Her weirdly serene expression in this last climb demands that we share in her triumph, but it is impossible to do so, for it represents the loss of her soul to revenge, just as the heroine's destruction of the villain at the climax of Brian De Palma's *The Fury* (1978) simultaneously rouses and anguishes. "Oh, can you be so cruel?" Aunt Penniman asks upon learning of Catherine Sloper's vengeful stratagem. "Oh, yes, I can be very cruel," Catherine responds, in a line written for the play. "I have been taught—by masters."

Another exemplary instance of the Fury can be found in *Possessed* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1947), one of the high points of 1940s films and the exemplary fusion of the woman's film and film noir. Joan Crawford stars as Louise Howell, a woman slowly going mad over her unrequited love for a man, David (Van Heflin), an architect who has an affair with her but doesn't love or want to marry her. The film's persephonal aspect lies in the fraught relationship between Louise and her stepdaughter, Carol (Geraldine Brooks), one prefigured by the contentious relationship between Louise and Carol's deranged mother, whom Louise, a private nurse, cared for, while being constantly assaulted by the mentally ill woman's accusations that Louise is having an affair with her husband. Learning that David and Carol are to be married pushes Louise to the breaking point. In one of the most memorable moments of genre film, Louise kills David by shooting him, her expression coldly contented, absolute, colder by far than his cold self-amusement: she smiles as she endlessly pumps him full of bullets. The Dutch angle at which Bernhardt shoots Crawford-as-Fury conveys a palpable mixture of madness and violent ecstasy, an embrace of evil as heady substitute for erotic fulfillment.

The victimized woman's transformation into an autonomous woman who speaks out on her own behalf or otherwise fights for her own cause provides some thrilling effects. Yet it also represents the annihilation of goodness and the triumph of a heartlessness that comes close to being a kind of evil. Precisely such an ambiguous transformation occurs in the climax of De Palma's horror

film *The Fury*, in which poignantly sensitive Gillian (Amy Irving), throughout the film so traumatized by her knowledge that her psychokinetic powers make people bleed, transforms into the apocalyptic titular force that blows the villain, Childress (John Cassavetes), to smithereens, literally. Of particular relevance is the way Childress attempts to treat Gillian in these final moments as a daughter, attempting to fold her into his arms as he comforts her—this from the man who has annihilated everyone close to her, including her psychic male twin Robin (Andrew Stevens), and who wants to use her powers for nefarious, espionage-plot purposes. Gillian appears to be weeping as Childress embraces her, incestuously, on a bed in the tentative early morning light. She kisses his eyes. De Palma uses a triple-cut-in to depict Gillian kissing Childress's eyes, his touching of his own eyes, and a shot of his eyes bleeding, blinded. (This is a telling homage to the triple-cut-in Hitchcock uses in *The Birds* to show us farmer Dan Fawcett's empty, gouged-out eyes through the mother Lydia Brenner's eyes.) Like an Oedipus with no comprehension of his own tragedy, Childress stumbles about, flailing blindly. The triple-cut-in amplifies the sense that her touch has altered, transformed his body—the rapid succession of images conveys the sense of immediate, unstoppable change. If Childress is a new Oedipus, the grievous, incestuous, calamity-causing father of the fallen modern world, Gillian is an Antigone who honors her brother but pointedly curses and wreaks vengeance upon her would-be father, a reversal of the patterns of classical tragedy, in which Antigone, Oedipus's daughter, cares for her abject, self-blinded, homeless father. As Childress's body begins to quake with the gathering force of Gillian's psychokinetic wrath, she moves from the bed and stands opposite her foe and victim. "You go to hell," she imprecates, her own body quaking with retributive wrath as her eyes transform from human brown to an uncanny, alien turquoise blue. The transformation of her eyes signifies her transformation from otherworldly maiden to chthonic underworld goddess; her annihilation of Childress, his body exploding from within and various bloody parts, his decapitated head in particular, zooming across different planes of the screen, confirms her status as Fury. What horror does to woman's film themes is to literalize them while also taking them to delirious levels of symbolic abstraction. If Catherine Sloper sought to shatter her father emotionally, Gillian literally shatters the father; if Joan Crawford's madwoman in *Possessed* wreaks vengeance on her cold, distant former lover, Gillian takes this act of murderous vengeance on her would-be lover-father to the *nth* degree.

I write this in the wake of debates over an article Amy Jenkins has written about the nonviolent nature of women, as opposed to the contemporary popular-culture preoccupation with violent women. "I do just want to point out," she writes, "that although women may be men's equals in many ways and although they may be just as proficient with machines as men are and although

they may be as foul-mouthed as it comes—the one thing women are not is violent.”⁵⁷ Throughout the history of Hollywood sound film, the one thing that *some* women can be counted on to be is violent. The films I have been discussing link this female capacity for violence with the woman's connection to ancient female rage in the form of the Furies.

Furies and *Femme Fatales*

The discussion of the *femme fatale* in classical Hollywood remains a controversial one, with most critics viewing the figure as misogynistic male fantasy, redolent of male dread of women, and some critics seeing the figure as more complex, even radical. The *femme fatale* is more fascinating to viewers than ever before, as E. Ann Kaplan writes in her introduction to the revised edition of her classic reader, *Women in Film Noir*: “US culture's renewed interest in noir participates in a nostalgic return to what can seem from [our current] perspective a far simpler 40s paranoia, cynicism, greed, and resulting violence. But there is also a genuine sense of connection to the dark, incomprehensible, fragmented universe of 40s films. Perhaps above all, the obvious gender trouble (and less obvious racial trouble) and their interconnection, haunt the imaginary of both the 40s and the 90s in especially acute ways. Gender and racial destabilizations add to the experiences of alienation, fragmentation and inconsistency that characterize both film noir and neo-noir.”⁵⁸

The gender ambiguation of the *femme fatale* extends to the Fury, as I have thus far argued. Both the *femme fatale* and the Fury unleash ferocious energies that make them phallic, formidable women within the often, though certainly not always, blandly constrained female world of classical Hollywood. Moreover, although Kaplan disagrees with Elizabeth Cowie's argument that the fantasy of a woman's sexuality as dangerous is as much a female as it is a male fantasy, it is nevertheless undeniable that the *femme fatale* has spoken as much to female as it has to male audiences over the years—and to queer audiences as well.⁵⁹

As Angela Martin, in a superb reading, argues, “Women in film noirs are more often subjected to male definition, control, and violence, not because they are a threat but because the male characters are themselves psychotic, or project a neurotic sense of threat on everyone and everything around them.”⁶⁰ As she further argues, “[There] does seem to me to be a greater possibility of a ‘woman's discourse’ at work in these films than is generally suggested within film noir criticism . . . There *had to be something* in these film noirs for female spectators—whether it was the treat of seeing women giving good, if not better, than they got; the idea that men and women can be equally evil or equally innocent; confirmation of the existence of male perversity; or, simply, the refreshingly life-size image of male fallibility.”⁶¹ On the subject of the predominance of

male artists in the noir genre, Martin argues—cautiously but compellingly—for the presence of many women artists working in the genre as well, whether in terms of screenplays or source material. She concludes, in light of this, “[It] does seem to me feasible to [offer a reading] that recognizes the presence of a multiplicity of view and asserts that of the feminine over the others. And, of course, by implication, I would argue that the same might be said of many of the other films from the cycle with central characters and, where applicable, women writers.”⁶²

While the Fury of my reading of the woman’s film relates closely to the *femme fatale*, I want carefully to distinguish between the two figures. In my view, the *femme fatale* is an irresistible facet of noir film while also being a problematic one. Such performances as Barbara Stanwyck’s in *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) and Jane Greer’s in *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947) remain indelible, as is the tremulous, unstable stamp Lizabeth Scott puts on John Cromwell’s Bogart noir *Dead Reckoning* (1947). Still, it is difficult to argue away the strong associations made in these films among femininity, duplicity, and death. The Fury, I argue, is a more complex, potentially more radical figure than the *femme fatale* whom she doubles. For example, Bette Davis’s Fury characters in *The Letter* (1940) and *The Little Foxes* (1941), both directed by William Wyler, and King Vidor’s *Beyond the Forest* dominate each film’s narrative and receive much more complex portraits than those accorded the *femme fatale* in the noir, even though all of these films, especially the first and the last, have noirish elements. In the noir, the *femme fatale* is a provocative agent of her own desires, shredding the lives of those around her, including the male protagonist she even, on occasion, loves, to ensure the fulfillment of her own nefarious, neurotic desires. But the Fury often manifests as a result of some kind of blow or deeper wound to a woman’s life and sometimes to her body. (Though I am focusing here on the noir-informed woman’s film Fury, the figure can be released in any kind of woman’s film, as my discussion of *The Heiress* evinces.) In *Deception*, a 1946 film in which the stars and director of *Now, Voyager* reteam, less successfully but in some ways even more provocatively, Bette Davis’s character kills her music-legend mentor and personal tyrant Claude Rains at the climax, a crime for which she must confess, finally, to her troubled musician husband, played by Paul Henreid, and to the law. In a way, *Deception* literalizes the symbolic rejection of both institutional male power and marriage in *Now, Voyager*. If Charlotte Vale nearly simultaneously rejects the psychiatrist (Rains), who had helped her once but whom she no longer needs, and the married man’s (Henreid) offer of a continued affair—and with it the potential for marriage itself, as she devotes her life to raising his daughter and to philanthropic causes—in *Deception*, Davis’s character kills the Rains character, an embodiment of wealth, position, and power, and effectively kills off her

husband and marriage as well. Moreover, one of the most disturbing themes of this fascinatingly murky film is the consistently raised one of domestic violence. While much of the focus of critical discussions is on the Davis character's penchant for lying, what motivates her mendacity, ever more flagrantly heightened, is her fear of being physically harmed by her husband but perhaps also by her wicked, mercurial mentor, who certainly subjects her to every kind of psychological abuse. In killing him, she defies moral code, but she also wields the Fury's might, enacting a repudiated but ancient and powerful form of female justice.

As the examples of *Possessed*, *Deception*, and *The Heiress* demonstrate, the Fury retaliates against oppressive male and sometimes-oppressive female rule, lashing out after grievous injury. In becoming a Fury, she destroys herself, like the bee that stings but then dies. Or does she? I argued earlier that the Fury forfeits her soul for the sake of consigning males to oblivion. But Crawford's character in *Possessed*, while a psychiatric ward inmate, may be, the film suggests, freed one day from the emotional demons that torment her; Catherine Sloper may actually relish a life of single blessedness in which Morris Townsend no longer maddens her with his mendacious ministrations; Gillian may go on to lead a race of psychokinetic gods. As I will further elaborate in the last chapter, the most disturbing aspect of the Fury is that, in the genealogy of her appearance from the woman's film to modern horror, her wrath extends more and more pronouncedly not to normative masculinity but to pointedly non-normative males, males who defy, on several levels, especially those of gender and sexual identity, normative codes.

How to Marry Your Own Wife: *Rebecca* and the Heterosexualization of the Heroine

Because so many of Alfred Hitchcock's films can, in my view, be read as woman's films, it is useful to turn our attention now to a Hitchcock film that has rightly been claimed as crucial both to Hitchcock's oeuvre and to the representation of women in classical Hollywood. Hitchcock's 1940 *Rebecca* is firmly in the tradition of the woman's gothic, the Daphne du Maurier novel that is its source being a loving pastiche of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. The gothic elements in *Jane Eyre*—the forbidding husband, matched by an equally forbidding house; the terrifying first wife who wreaks havoc on the present—find new forms in du Maurier and Hitchcock. Critics have given films such as *Rebecca* several names: for Mary Ann Doane, these are "paranoid woman's films"; for Thomas Elsaesser "Freudian feminist melodramas;" and for Ed Gallaent they are "paranoid couple's films," in which the married couple exchange, critique, and use each other's fantasies against one another.⁶³

Freudian themes saturate Hitchcock's films, which have proven so influential to the horror genre, *Psycho* in particular. Tania Modleski has shown that Hitchcock's film *Rebecca* foregrounds the overwhelming though repressed presence of the mother even in stories of female oedipal development, the movement away from the mother and toward the father and his avatar, the suitor-husband. I argue, both along and against the lines of Modleski's argument, that the film—as do many other Hitchcock films—reproduces key themes in the Demeter and Persephone myth that will in turn be reproduced in the horror film. In other words, the film concerns itself with the heroine's struggle between her desire for maternal union and her wish to be the properly married woman. Bringing queer-theory perspectives to bear on both the film and Modleski's treatment, and drawing on Patricia White's lesbian reading of the film, I argue that *Rebecca's* chief project is to demonstrate precisely *how* the heroine acquires a functional adult female sexuality, one shown to be properly heterosexual and marital.⁶⁴ The film fuses both the female-marriage and the male-quest plots, in the terms of Carolyn Heilbrun, while tying both to the mythic mother-daughter relationship. As White has demonstrated, Modleski's reading is hampered by her failure to include the character of Rebecca in a consideration of the film's lesbian subtext. Modleski's new afterword to her pivotal study *The Women Who Knew Too Much* does, however, address White's, as well as other queer critics', concerns, while creating some new problems of its own. In sum, however, I believe Modleski is right to talk about the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship in this and other Hitchcock films, as well as to locate its queer or lesbian thematic within this relationship. Which is to say, whatever the ways in which lesbian sexuality resists, eludes, cannot be contained by, or simply distinguishes itself from the mother-daughter relationship, Hitchcock's films and others in its company *do* proceed to theorize female sexuality through the mother-daughter relationship, including its lesbian potentialities. Moreover, it should always be remembered that, with all the limitations suggested thereby, we are always dealing with male fantasies of femininity and determining their value and their vexations as such, rather than any "authentic," and certainly rather than any clinical, version of sexuality.

The queer element in Hitchcock's films extends to the mother-daughter themes to which the director was so powerfully drawn. The queer aspect of Hitchcock's mother-daughter relationships is relevant to his depiction of non-normative masculinity and therefore to the ultimate "transformation" this study considers: the heroine's transformation into a punitive force against the deviant and otherwise nonnormative male that emerges spectacularly in *Psycho* and then becomes one of the central projects of modern horror. Hitchcock's films provide a vital liminal space between the woman's film and modern horror, a site in which the energies of both are negotiated and come to unsettling fruition.

Rebecca clearly establishes what will be Hitchcock's chief concerns in his American films: the woman's relationship to patriarchy and her own identity as shaped by it. One of the first words of the film—"Stop!"—is diegetically uttered by the unnamed woman who will become the second Mrs. de Winter (Joan Fontaine, in a performance rivaled only by her work in Ophul's *Letter from an Unknown Woman*), and the word and its urgent delivery resonate throughout the film. It is her protest against death (the suicide attempt of the man who will be her husband) but will also come to seem an ironic statement. The command contrasts with her inability to halt the process of her own normalization: she can stop Maxim but not herself; she can stop his death but not the death of her own identity.

The emotional suspense in *Rebecca* lies in the second Mrs. de Winter's struggle over her own gendered identity, one always presented in relation to that of other women, primarily the first, dead wife Rebecca and the housekeeper Mrs. Danvers. The women to whom the heroine is compared outmatch her always in their formidability: from the start, her tremulously sensitive version of femininity is counterbalanced against a tougher, more masculinized femininity. The heroine works as a paid companion to the crassly nouveau-riche Mrs. Edythe Van Hopper (peerlessly vulgar Florence Bates), whose toughness and crassness finds an apposite screen metaphor in her gesture of stubbing out a cigarette in a jar of cold cream. In this first section of the film, Maxim de Winter (Laurence Olivier), the melancholy millionaire who will marry the heroine and bring her to Manderley, his haunted, sumptuous mansion, appears appealing, a prince rescuing the heroine from a wicked witch. Like Nathaniel Hawthorne (think of the cackling old witch, Mistress Hibbins, in *The Scarlet Letter*), Hitchcock is aghast at the spectacle of the ugly, mannish older woman whose sexuality remains unchecked. Mrs. Van Hopper's avid, crude desire for pleasure prepares us for the revelation of Rebecca's sexual voraciousness and Mrs. Danvers's saphic yearnings, all of which exceed the constrictive boundaries of female sexual propriety. Mrs. Van Hopper fits the serial killer Uncle Charlie's description of the woman he kills over and over again in *Shadow of a Doubt*: a widow who inherits and flaunts her dead husband's money, an older woman whose social and sexual agency eludes masculine control. (Indeed, in one harrowing shot late in *Shadow*, we perceive one of these "Merry Widows" through Uncle Charlie's contemptuous serial-killer eyes: leering, sexually provocative, beckoning, grotesque.) While we are rooting against Mrs. Van Hopper and for the heroine, we are also being seduced into rooting for Maxim's incoherent but implacable plan to make the heroine precisely into the 36-year-old woman with pearls around her neck he claims to abhor. We are rooting, in other words, for the heroine's transformation from an independent-minded woman into a Great Lady, a person who endorses power rather than speaks truth to it ("Stop!").

As Modleski has persuasively argued, the film stages a version of the female Oedipus complex, in which the woman must negotiate her conflictual relationship to her mother, pass through a stage in which she desires her father, and eventually settle on an exogamous erotic object, a father substitute, her husband. Modleski admirably discusses the opportunities such an unusual narrative, in the context of classical Hollywood, affords the heroine for personal discovery, erotic as well as social. While she is receptive to what is, on occasion, resistant and even radical within Hitchcock's representation of femininity, she is always scrupulously critical of the misogynistic elements in his work. It is surprising, therefore, that, in my view, she actually softens some of the ideological blows of *Rebecca*, which transforms, along with its heroine, from a courageous to a conservative work.

One of the most interesting aspects of Hitchcock's visual design in the film is the ways in which the heroine experiences and negotiates gothic architectural space. Maxim's mansion, Manderley, mazelike and massive, emanates male ancestral power. What is especially striking, however, is the extent to which a female power suffuses, even dominates, this male space. As overarching and suffocating as Manderley, Rebecca's ghostly absence-presence charges male space with a menacing, Medusan energy that threatens to engulf the heroine. In this manner, the film accords with Barbara Creed's thesis of the horror genre, with which the gothic ghost-story trappings of *Rebecca* intersect, as a manifestation of fears of being devoured by the archaic mother. But in the extent to which there is also a powerful yearning for *return* to the mother, a desperate desire for reunion with her, *Rebecca* illuminates the equally ardent desire in horror and the woman's film for the restoration of lost origins. Hitchcock's precise and detailed evocation of the lesbianism of Mrs. Danvers (so hypnotically played by the cobra-like Dame Judith Anderson) charges the heroine's conflictual responses to female sexuality and to the Death-Mother with a feverish, unseemly erotic intensity. There is perhaps no more ardent description of fetishism in the cinema than the shot of Mrs. Danvers holding up dead Rebecca's lustrous fur coat to her own face, and then offering it to the unnamed heroine for olfactory and tactile perusal; more daring still, this is not just fetishism but lesbian fetishism, an even more specialized erotic register.⁶⁵ Hitchcock, in other words, through du Maurier's deeply suggestive text, finds ways of accessing and distancing himself from the figure of the mother, site of horror, longing, and despair at once: Mrs. Danvers's perverse love of Rebecca both evokes the longing for and registers the revulsion at the return to mother.

While the film demands much closer attention than I can provide in this chapter, I want to draw our attention to what is, in my view, the film's foregrounding of the theme of transformation, which has both radical and ultimately more conservative implications in the film. If, as I have been arguing

throughout this study, female transformation represents, on one level at least, the Persephone-like daughter figure's transition from her Demeter-like mother's side to adult sexuality, usually figured as marriage, the kinds of transformation undergone by the heroine in this film both eerily problematize the mother-daughter relationship and reify the woman's sexuality as strictly marital as well as contained within the logic of patriarchy. The narrative's investments in restoring the patriarchal order are deeply dependent on misogyny, a misogyny the heroine herself supports through her identification with her husband's hatred of the patriarchy-defying Rebecca.

In the famous scene in which the second Mrs. De Winter, tricked by Mrs. Danvers, disastrously dons a version of the same dress Rebecca once wore to a masked ball, the film takes the trope of transformation to an especially provocative place. The dress was worn by a female De Winter ancestor, whose portrait hangs high in a hallway, above a long staircase, staircases being a consistent expressionistic trope in Hitchcock that metaphorizes emotional states. In wearing the dress, the heroine "wears" the identities of both this female ancestor *and* Rebecca, always absent and present at once. The sad irony here is that the heroine, longing for the new powers that the dress will both bestow upon her and signify her as having acquired, believes that, in wearing this dress, she is asserting her own newfound agency. After the extraordinary comeuppance scene in which she tells Mrs. Danvers, who has tormented her throughout the film, "I am Mrs. De Winter now," the heroine asserts her own identity and her claim to wifely power. She pleads with her aloof, unresponsive husband to allow her to throw another one of the masked balls the De Winters had been so famous for when Rebecca was alive; her appearance at the ball in the dress, which Mrs. Danvers maliciously encouraged her to wear, produces the opposite reaction from what she intends. Instead of signifying her triumphant claim to her new status and to her beauty, it signifies both her possession by Rebecca and her inability to make Maxim happy: when he sees her in the dress, surrounded by newly arrived guests, including his sister and her husband, Maxim explodes, telling her to change and put something, anything, else on. "Rebecca!" his sister (Gladys Cooper, who plays the heroine's mother in *Now, Voyager*) gasps in horror. As exquisitely limned by Joan Fontaine, the heroine's emotional transformation—from anticipatory, nervous joy as, rich and opulent in her dress, she makes her way toward Maxim down the long staircase to display herself in her regal costume, to stunned, embarrassed horror once he perceives what she is wearing—is one of the indelible moments in Hitchcock. It is a moment that Brian De Palma will distend for an agonizing duration throughout the prom sequence in *Carrie*, the heroine's transformation from beauty to ugliness, joy to horror. Shunned, scorned, the heroine races back upstairs, climbing the staircase and toward a higher level of confrontation with her deepest anxieties,

away from her unappeasable husband and the guests and back toward Rebecca's room, where Mrs. Danvers waits in cold satisfaction at seeing the success of her plot to discredit the new wife. The heroine moves, then, away from her husband and back toward the scene of the maternal, if we take, following Modleski, Rebecca and her still-preserved room as a kind of maternal figure and domain.

Hitchcock deepens this Freudian narrative of femininity's relationship to the maternal—the husband only a substitute or a copy of the real love object of the mother, the mother-daughter bond fraught with anger, the daughter experiencing the mother as tyrannical, a constrictive net from which she attempts to escape—with the lesbian subtext that runs throughout the film and forever threatens to become text. The presence of Mrs. Danvers amplifies the erotic undertones of the mother-daughter relationship, as does Rebecca's intensifying sexual menace, charging these relationships among women with malevolent, perverse force. Revealing that in the woman's film and horror, a genre anticipated in the uncanny world of the film, an intense longing for return to the mother just as acutely drives narrative as a dread over this return, the heroine comes extremely close to rejoining mother—the sea in which Rebecca apparently drowned and that holds her dead body in the Death-Mother's embrace—almost yielding to Mrs. Danvers's satanic seduction. Gently, insistently, terrifyingly, Mrs. Danvers urges the heroine to throw herself into the sea, far beneath the balcony on which the two women stand, staring down at the water crashing against the shore. All of these symbols—the sea, Rebecca's room, the female ancestral dress—together convey a sense of the dread of the archaic mother to whom the heroine verges on making an imminent, deadly return, while the heroine's hypnotized susceptibility to Mrs. Danvers's proposition conveys an erotically charged desire to *return* to the mother. As if to literalize as well as to give climactic release to these tensions, an explosion occurs—an alarm rocket alerts everyone to the fact that the sailboat in which Rebecca's body lies has been discovered, which discovery saves the heroine from drowning herself at the servant's behest. Mother reemerges, as she will in *Psycho*, a corpse with more power over narrative than that wielded by the living characters. In some ways, Rebecca saves, in this fashion, the heroine from death, but this implication is entirely dwarfed by the ensuing conflicts, in which Rebecca uncannily triumphs over Maxim from beyond the grave.

In my view, *Rebecca* is, up to this point, one of Hitchcock's signal achievements: an extraordinary critique of the woman's experience of both marriage and male power, as well as an exploration of her own experience of female sexuality, not without phobic undertones but also too complex to be reduced to these undertones. Yet with the discovery of Rebecca's body, Maxim's subsequent revelation that he "killed" Rebecca and, most important, the heroine's complicity with Maxim's decision to cover up the details of Rebecca's death, the

film takes a deeply conservative turn, though not one without its own revealing interest. A softening of the novel, in which Maxim really does kill Rebecca, the film's big reveal is still quite chilling: after Rebecca taunts Maxim with the revelation that she is pregnant by another man—her cousin Flavell (George Sanders)—Maxim strikes her, and she falls in such a way that she hits her head and dies. Maxim reveals this to the heroine after she finally tells him that she has never believed that he could love her, being apparently so in love with Rebecca. “Loved her? I hated her!” he responds, finally disclosing to the heroine the truth of his hideous former marriage.

Rebecca, as created by du Maurier, is a female character fascinating for her penchant for violence as well as sexual excitement, and the intensity of du Maurier's characterization seethes beneath the surface of Hitchcock's film. Rebecca seems to have gained a sadistic satisfaction from humiliating Maxim, getting him to project outwardly the illusion of marital happiness while all the while suffering from Rebecca's contempt for him and utter contempt for their marriage, which patrician Maxim, too fearful of scandal, must continue to live with even after Rebecca tells him “things about herself that I will never reveal to another living soul.” Rebecca, like the film noir *femme fatale*, represents a thoroughly phobic attitude toward female sexual autonomy, which takes embodied form in the menacing Mrs. Danvers and her lesbian threat, suggestive of the wide range of Rebecca's sexual tastes, her unspeakable desires, and the dire possibilities of unlicensed female sexuality. Yet it is also true that Rebecca is pitiable—having learned that she is dying of cancer, she manipulates Maxim into killing her, a kind of suicide by angry husband. And not only because she is ultimately pitiable but because she is a fellow woman, Rebecca should inspire more sympathy than she does in the heroine. The shy, awkward, bumbling heroine finally comes into her own by siding with her husband and against Rebecca. “Rebecca is dead—she can't bear witness,” the heroine says chillingly, adding, “She can't hurt you now.” Protecting Maxim against the cruelties of this demonic mother-wife, the heroine becomes the good mother, comforting her child-husband. Joining in with his patriarchal rule, she becomes the patriarchal wife, who stands with her husband against the excessive threats of autonomous femininity.

Especially striking in this film obsessed with women's appearances, the heroine's transformation into the patriarchal wife occurs on a physical as well as an emotional level. She is truly the woman who impersonates herself of Wendy Doniger's description: she plays herself as Maxim's wife, a performance of a role with which, like Ronald Colman's actor who comes to believe he is Macbeth, she identifies.⁶⁶ The whole film is a preparation for her role as wife, and the whole film leads up to the moment when she can finally give a successful performance in this role. A new investigation of Rebecca's death ensues in which

the lie Maxim told is newly scrutinized but, thanks in part to the heroine and the revelation of Rebecca's cancer, once again accepted as proof that Rebecca killed herself at sea. Giving the sexually charged and desiring woman cancer is a punitive maneuver still very much with us—compare, for example, the heroine of *Y tu mamá también* (Alfonso Cuarón 2001), who goes off on a lengthy sexual adventure with two young men who also desire each other, and Samantha on *Sex and the City* (“I’m a try-sexual—I’ll try anything,” she triumphantly announces in one episode). Both of these sexually adventurous women develop cancer, the former dying from it. Giving Rebecca cancer rather than a child, the film, as did the novel, makes her into an antimother, producing death rather than new life, as it punishes her for her unlicensed sexuality.

The heroine's attire at the trial is suggestive, a masculinizing suit that confirms as it reflects her absorption into patriarchal logic. This mannish attire, suggestive of that which will adorn many Hitchcock heroines who flirt with gender ambiguity, is in contrast to the lovely, expensive black cocktail dress she wore earlier in another attempt to please, charm, and gain her husband's notice, leading him to respond, “That's not really your kind of thing at all, is it?” as he chuckles at her. In the heroine's case, the mannish trial attire deemphasizes her sexuality, at least in conventional feminine terms, confirming Maxim's directive to her never to be “thirty-six years old,” never to be, like Rebecca, a sexually charged and autonomous woman; indeed, he laments that her innocent, young-girl look that he loved so much is gone forever. The film suggests that proper wifely identity actually depends on the deadening of woman's sexuality, turning her into a double of her sex-fearful husband. As Laurence Olivier strangely and fascinatingly plays Maxim, he is an odd mixture of detachment, aloofness, and tremulous, “feminine” emotionalism; it's almost as if in taking on her proper wifely role, siding with her unraveling husband and ensuring the proper execution of their plot to cover up what is, even in bowdlerized form in the film, Rebecca's murder, the heroine not only comes into her own as wife but also takes on the more active, masculine role, a shift conveyed in her new choice of dress.

This female *bildungsroman* builds toward the woman's realization of her full potentiality, but in doing so makes this realization indistinguishable from her assimilation into normative regimes of proper gendered, sexual, and class identity, even as it suggests that the patriarchal order, perhaps unwittingly, desexualizes women by transforming them into proper wives, just as the sexually brazen Rebecca's excessive erotic appetites leave her husband a flailing, effeminated mess. Again, I am speaking here of conventional standards of gender and appearance. While one could also argue that the second Mrs. De Winter's masculinizing attire at the trial links her to the lesbian-coded Mrs. Danvers, I feel the chief effect is to link the wife—to solder her—to male power. As one

striking small moment in the film reveals, Mrs. Danvers, if anything, is more contemptuous of the heroine the closer she gets to success and stability as a wife and therefore, in this particular film, the power of patriarchy. In a trial-adjacent scene, the officials, prompted by the troublemaking Flavell, try to get Mrs. Danvers to reveal if Rebecca was indeed pregnant with Flavell's child, which would greatly enhance the case Flavell makes that Maxim did indeed kill her. Mrs. Danvers hesitates before giving up information about Rebecca's private doctor, who will know whether or not she was pregnant (which, it will be revealed, she was not; when they do contact the doctor, played by Hitchcock stalwart Leo G. Carroll, it is he who informs them that Rebecca was dying of cancer). Maxim looks deeply stricken, afraid Mrs. Danvers will actually reveal the information (believing, as he does, that Rebecca was pregnant); then the second Mrs. De Winter slowly, tentatively rises from her chair, as if to add through body language some silent plea that Mrs. Danvers not unseal her lips. At seeing Mrs. De Winter's rise, in all senses of the word, Mrs. Danvers *does* speak, the words suddenly bursting forth rapidly, revealing exactly who the doctor is and where to find him. Mrs. Danvers speaks now, whereas the heroine, who once through speech stopped death (the "Stop!" that prevented Maxim's suicide), remains silent in an effort to squelch woman's speech. Mrs. Danvers speaks on behalf of women at this moment, affirming with almost shockingly public openness her devotion to Rebecca—bordering on revealing her desire for her even as she is also confirming, she believes, that Rebecca was reproductively heterosexual before her death.

Ultimately, I find the narrative of gender in this film, gorgeously mysterious and affecting though it is, a conservative, misogynistic one. Hitchcock's later films such as *Shadow of a Doubt*, *Notorious*, *Spellbound*, *Vertigo*, *Psycho*, *The Birds*, *Marnie*, and *Frenzy* are all, in my opinion, despite their increasingly difficult ideological disturbances, much more strikingly feminist statements. Still, the film as it stands offers a chillingly acute and precise account of the patriarchalization of woman's desire and subjectivity. And one has to concede that Hitchcock's queer themes ultimately supersede the film's heterosexualizing narrative: Mrs. Danvers's climactic destruction of Manderley is a heroic, if deranged, rebuttal to the renewed power of patriarchal rule. Literally destroying the father's house, she sets Manderley ablaze, dying in the flames that suggest, in Freudian terms, the sexual desire kindled in her still by her devotion to Rebecca. As the flames horrifically engulf her, Mrs. Danvers achieves, finally, what she has longed for, reunion with Rebecca, an extraordinary image of desire, longing, and death at once. The Death-Mother claims an avid lesbian daughter. The final image of the film, the bold, gigantic letter "R" imprinted on the pillowcase bursting into flames, restores Rebecca's uncanny power over narrative while also confirming that her fiery, ravenous desire continues to burn and consume all.

The Ethics of Transformation

In his revised analysis of Hitchcock's *Marnie*, Robin Wood addresses the question, "Does Mark save Marnie?" Wood replies that yes, he does, but more importantly, she saves herself.⁶⁷ As a Wood admirer, I appreciate his championing of this still-underappreciated film; but I'm not at all convinced that his conclusion is true of *Marnie*. I tend to agree with Michele Piso, in her superb essay on the film (the best treatment of it, in my view, and justly praised anew by Tania Modleski in a new afterword to *The Women Who Knew Too Much*) that *Marnie* is an extraordinarily despairing film about class differences and their destructive effects: "The world of capital dominates and chills the erotic and creative aspects of life."⁶⁸ Piso pays particular attention to the abandoned mother of this film and the significance of Hitchcock's expressionistic trope of the color red that suffuses the screen when Marnie panics at the sight of the color: this is the "blood of the terrified and violated body, the blood of women, of murder and rape . . . the red of suffering."⁶⁹ This film is about the transformation, on several interconnected levels, of a woman: from criminal female to prosperous wife, from brunette to blonde to auburn to blonde again; from woman with bobbed hair to one with long, flowing hair; from daughter to wife to daughter again to wife once more. And throughout, every single one of Marnie's innumerable changes alerts us to the great unchanging fact of her life: the traumatic event of her childhood, when she murdered the sailor customer to protect her piteously screaming prostitute mother, an event that colors everything about her, from hair color to crime to horse love to revulsion at male sexuality to her ardent love for her cold, rigid, privately tormented mother.

For this is the wrenching core of the phenomenon of transformation throughout cinematic representation, in so many different genres: physical, outward transformation greatly exceeds one on an emotional level. Why is this significant? It is significant because it is almost entirely *through* one's physical appearance that one manifests one's identity *and* emotional state. This is to say, others judge who we are, what we are like, and what particular kind of person we are and feel ourselves to be entirely from the way we look in the eyes of our beholders. Whatever other kinds of impressions people make and develop about us are secondary revisions from impressions derived from our appearance. This is an arguable set of points, perhaps, offered from personal convictions. The disparity, the gulf between how we appear and how we feel is particularly wrenching precisely because (a) there is always already a presumption that we *look* precisely the way we *feel*, that how we look is an outward manifestation of how we are doing emotionally, and (b) there is always a pressure on us, especially if we happen to be female, to be emotionally coherent, stable, and joyously, confidently healthy and to manifest this emotional state outwardly, in an

appositely coherent, stable, and joyously, confidently healthy physical appearance. Good looks as well as good genes amply enhance these effects, of course, as does the right skin pigmentation—all of the above in place, all the better.

I want to ask the forbearance of the reader at this point for indulging in a few extremely idiosyncratic and personal observations. The consistent sexual objectification of women in our culture, which Laura Mulvey and others have rightly pointed out, cannot be overstated. I would add, however, that gay males come under equally stringent and compulsory scrutiny, their bodies evaluated for their conformity to gay-culture-established standards of beauty and physical finesse. And not just gay culture's but the larger culture's as well, given the associations commonly made between gay men and gym-obsessed buffness. Rippling muscles and general devotion to the care of the self are unquestioned hallmarks of the gay male imaginary. One of the ironies of gay male life is its self-imposed correspondence to the travails of femininity, the ways that queers have submitted themselves to the beauty myth, with all of its attendant exclusivities, disciplinary standards, and disastrous emotional consequences.

In the end, female transformation allegorizes gay male identity while it speaks to and for women, perhaps presumptively so. What cannot be denied is that women and gay males both have a large cultural claim on the idea that transformation liberates self and soul. This is not to suggest that straight males have no investment in or socially enforced obligations to the idea of transformation; no one likes flabby straight men, either—especially other straight men. But transformation as a straight male investment almost always occurs most significantly on a symbolic, abstract level, such as the culture of the self-made man in antebellum America and throughout the decades following this era. The man who is self-*made* transforms himself from an impecunious initial self into a prosperous future self through initiative, competitive energy, gumption, and persevering, indefatigable effort, or so goes the myth. For women and gay men, it's a different story. Women transform themselves *into* women, through shopping and makeup, through clothes and cosmetics. While gay males transform themselves *into* gay males on a symbolic level first, coming out of the closet and declaring their sexuality, that abstract transformation must then be met with and reinforced by the much more visible and palpable one of physical transformation, developing that Nautilized, streamlined gym musculature that functions as the identificatory armor of gay male culture. The transforming woman of American genre film allegorizes the experience of being closeted and of coming out of the closet at once, even as she stands in quite singly for herself alone.

These are some of the overarching reasons I find female transformation as it is commonly represented so moving. The disparity between heightened, enhanced physical appearance once a profound emotional change has occurred, a new look that outwardly signifies this interior change, and the actual emotional state

of the person who has undergone a profound change is precisely what makes the woman's film and modern horror at their best poignant and urgent. When Charlotte Vale appears before all the ship passengers as her resplendent new self, that resplendence largely occurs on the outside. Still vulnerable and still groping toward confidence, though, paradoxically, doing so with a new level of confidence, she tells Jerry, "I'm not well yet." Charlotte may be identifying with psychiatric normativity here, classifying herself as emotionally unfit, not up to social standards of "wellness." Yet she is also plainly, plangently calling our attention to the socially obscured reality that outward appearance and emotional states are often at odds, though we continue to equate one with the other, and our culture always makes the emotional aspect of our lives the supplement to the much more valued, hierarchically superior term of the body. No doubt many of the ways in which these dynamics play out in genre film oppress actual women. Nevertheless, oppression isn't the only story, just as repression isn't the only story of culture. The myth of transformation, like all myths, encompasses a fuller range of human experiences than the most programmatic uses of it would suggest.

PART II

Modern Horror

PREFACE TO PART II

Modern Horror as the Concealed Woman's Film

The popularity of the Hollywood woman's film genre extends from the 1930s to the early 1960s, after which it appears to become extinct. The woman's film's doesn't die, however; rather, it transforms, much like its heroines, into something new. I argue that the seemingly defunct genre of the woman's film takes a significant new form in the modern horror film, which repurposes female melodrama as it expands upon the precedent of Hitchcock's 1960 *Psycho*. Modern horror can be roughly divided into two categories: *oedipal horror*, focusing on problems between fathers and children (*It's Alive*, *The Stepfather*) and *persephonal horror*, focusing on problems between mothers and children, most often daughters (*The Exorcist*, *Carrie*, the *Alien* films) but sometimes also sons, and usually then a queer-themed film (*Psycho*, the first two films of the *Friday the 13th* series, *The Silence of the Lambs*). As is obvious from the equal relevance of films like *It's Alive*, with its dread of birth, to the strain of mother-child horror, these categorizations are always fluid.

Briefly to recapitulate some key points, this study takes a different position toward the horror genre from that taken by Barbara Creed in her book *The Monstrous-Feminine*. Creed argues that the primary fear at the core of the horror-film genre is that the subject will be reengulfed by the terrifying figure of the archaic mother, whose mawlike threat hovers around the cultural narratives—such as Freudian psychoanalysis and Hollywood film—that repress her presence. Yet, in my view, an equally urgent desire for *return* to the mother also informs the genre, and, as I will show in the next chapters of this book, several of Creed's exemplary archaic-mother-dread texts are just as interpretable as works that foreground a longing for origins. Modern horror inherits long-standing anxieties over and conflictual wishes for return to the mother. In its persephonal form, it specifically inherits these anxieties as they played out in the woman's film.

Both the woman's film and persephonal horror reenact the Homeric myth of Demeter and Persephone. This myth about the abduction and rape of the maiden goddess Persephone by Hades, the king of the underworld, and the ensuing world-shattering grief of Demeter, Persephone's mother and the goddess of the seasons, grain, and the harvest, provides a crucial precedent for the woman's film and modern horror's recurring theme of a longing for the return to origins.

Three major trends in the woman's film recur and are reimagined in persephonal horror: mother-daughter relationships; transformation; and the phallic, avenging, retributive woman, the Fury who vanquishes male deviance, a figure released in fusions of the woman's film with other genres, most often film noir but sometimes the western. The persephonal horror film foregrounds relationships between mother and daughter, takes the theme of transformation to dizzying heights, and spectacularly showcases the phallic woman.

Key texts in the woman's film genre, principally *Now, Voyager* (1942) and *Imitation of Life* (in both the 1934 and the 1959 versions), simultaneously thematize the woman's transformation and a central conflict in the mother-daughter relationship. I have been arguing that female transformation, usually occurring on a physical as well as an emotional level, and mother-daughter bonds are Hollywood versions of the Homeric myth of Demeter and Persephone, primarily exhibiting the interest that male directors have had in these narratives of female sexual development as well as transformation (somatic, social, emotional, sometimes all at once). When the woman's film cross-fertilizes with film noir (*The Letter*, *Leave Her to Heaven*, *Deception*, *Possessed*, *Flamingo Road*, *Beyond the Forest*) or with the western (*The Furies*), an important figure emerges: the phallic, avenging woman, a Fury who enacts retributive justice not only on males, usually figured as sexually nonnormative, but also at times on females, a prime example being the scene in which Barbara Stanwyck's ambiguous heroine in *The Furies* (Anthony Mann, 1950, an important film only now getting the recognition it deserves), standing with her back to her mother's mirror, hurls a pair of scissors at her father's new fiancée and Stanwyck's bitter rival (Judith Anderson, who played Mrs. Danvers in *Rebecca*), a terrifying high point in this western-melodrama.

Together, these cross-fertilized melodrama-noir-western figures form a template for modern horror. As such, this template becomes remarkably visible in the horror films of the 1960s that prominently feature powerful stars of the woman's film, especially Bette Davis and Joan Crawford (*What Ever Happened to Baby Jane*; *Hush . . . Hush*, *Sweet Charlotte*; *Dead Ringer*; *Strait-Jacket*), but several other classical Hollywood female stars as well, such as Olivia de Havilland (*Lady in a Cage*, *Hush . . . Hush*), Joan Fontaine (*The Devil's Own*), Tallulah Bankhead (*Die, Die, My Darling*), Shelley Winters (*Who Slew Auntie Roo?*),

and supporting actress stalwart Agnes Moorehead (*Hush . . . Hush; Dear Dead Delilah*). Though critically neglected or patronized, these decadent late-stage woman's films are forerunners of modern horror, providing a vital liminal stage between genres, coming as they do between the official decline of the woman's film and the birth of modern horror (*Psycho, Rosemary's Baby*).

Mothers and Other Strangers

In the wake of *Psycho* and these hybrid horror-woman's films, a new spate of horror movies emerged that redefined the genre. *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) was a particularly significant example, making a woman's experience of marriage and pregnancy, in an incipiently feminist moment, the stuff of horror-movie nightmares. (In contrast, Polanski's 1965 *Repulsion* figures woman's sexuality itself as inherently terrifying.) *Wait Until Dark*, a popular though almost completely critically overlooked film from 1967, directed by Terence Young from the Frederick Knott play, stars Audrey Hepburn as Susy Hendrix, a resourceful blind woman contending against a band of criminals led by the psychotic Mr. Roat (Alan Arkin). *Wait Until Dark* acutely bridges the gap between the woman's film and modern horror. Its persephonal core lies in the relationship that develops between Susy and Lisa (Samantha Jones), a bespectacled adolescent girl initially presented as the bane of Susy's existence—ill tempered and contemptuous of Susy, jealous of her relationship to her husband Sam (the suave and smug Efram Zimbalist Jr.), throwing pots and pans and other kitchen items around the apartment to terrify her. Lisa strikingly recalls the equally unhappy Tina of *Now, Voyager* (and like Tina, Lisa is estranged from her teen peers, who give her, according to Sam, "the treatment" because of her new braces). That Lisa becomes Susy's chief ally in outwitting and surviving the increasingly terrifying threat of Roat and his gang heals the mother-daughter rift of the woman's film, at least for a moment. "Great *girl*," Susy sobs as, having survived Roat's attack, she embraces Lisa. This was a grrl-power movie ahead of its time, and it's worth comparing the embrace between this symbolic mother and daughter to that immediately after it, between Susy and Sam. After having endured two hours of sadism, the sightless Susy must still stumble across the debris-strewn kitchen to reach Sam, who calls out to her from a distance rather than moving to where she sits crouching and weeping. Marriage, it is subtly implied, demands an equal show of resilience from this embattled, victimized woman.

Most treatments of William Friedkin's famous film *The Exorcist* frame it as misogynistic; in Barbara Creed's view, the film presents the female body as itself a site of horror. If we reexamine *The Exorcist* as a concealed woman's film, we can understand that one of its major themes is a mother's attempt to preserve her relationship with her daughter despite overwhelming male opposition. The

film illuminates the ways in which the horror genre repurposes the now defunct genre of the woman's film. Friedkin's representation of mother-daughter bonds and female sexuality has deep roots in Freudian psychoanalysis, particularly his theorization of female sexuality. Complementary to Freud's unfinished case study "*Dora*," *The Exorcist* focuses on a young woman whose body is out of control, a somatic anarchy linked to anxieties over sexuality. Much like the female hysteric of Freud's early treatments and of *Dora*, the young possessed woman in Friedkin's film speaks in tongues, and her bodily transformations reflect phobic cultural attitudes toward femininity and female sexuality. That the younger priest, Father Damien Karras (Jason Miller), faltering in his faith, is also a psychiatrist evokes the Freudian connections in the narrative. The figure of the young woman becomes a battleground not only for conflicts in genre but also for conflicts in sexuality; the priestly figures in the film are depicted as queer males who are forced—with particular violence to both themselves and the young women they battle and attempt to rescue—to confront heterosexuality even as they are punished for their sexual nonnormativity. This complex thematic, I will show, has a long life in the horror film.

If the film is indeed misogynistic, what is equally true about it is the intensity with which it depicts mother-daughter love. The scenes between Regan, the girl possessed (Linda Blair), and her actress-mother Chris MacNeil, played by Ellen Burstyn, before the possession sets in are notably warm, physically affectionate. As Chris begs a resistant, skeptical Father Karras for help in the form of an exorcism, she explains, "If you showed me Regan's double, I would know in a minute that it wasn't her; I would know it in my gut. Now I'm telling you that that thing upstairs is not my daughter." The sexually obscene, perverse, and violent demon, figured as male, that possesses Regan is a dark image of male sexuality as well as compulsory heterosexuality's inevitable colonization of female sexuality. The moment in which Chris reclaims her depossessed daughter at the climax is heartbreaking in its simplicity as well as plangent emotion, especially considering the sacrifice of his own life that the younger priest makes to save the girl's life. As mother and daughter embrace, mother reclaims the daughter sentenced to hell, Demeter reclaiming Persephone, Hades banished back to his realm (for the time being anyway). This movie is about the plangency of a return to mother and mother's fierce devotion to her daughter, whom she rescues, with some help, from death.

Reinforcing these persephephal themes are Father Karras's own tormented memories of his mother, who dies in the nursing home his uncle puts her in and from which he fails to free her. In a haunting slow-motion sequence, he dreams of her emerging from the subway and descending back into its depths before he can, racing, get to her; the sequence is punctuated by almost subliminal, terrifying images of the demon, adding the Death-Mother motif to the longing to return to

mother. In a key scene late in the film, the demon impersonates his mother, intensifying and drawing on his reserves of grief-filled guilt. His longing for mother matches the level of feeling between Chris and her possessed daughter.

As I will demonstrate in the treatments of *Carrie* and the *Alien* films that follow, these films reveal a longing for return to mother as vivid as the dread of this return. In the last chapter, I discuss the ways in which modern horror in its later stages takes certain preoccupations of the woman's film to phobic levels, namely in the form of the woman as retributive force. Whereas women who killed in classical Hollywood did so in retaliation against normative male rule, the women avengers of modern horror frequently destroy not normative men but the freaks and the geeks, the mother-obsessed, arrested-development males who frequent the slasher film in particular. These trends impinge upon female sexuality in several ways as well, including the instances in which the retributive woman is also coded as lesbian. As several important films such as those of the *Alien* series and *The Silence of the Lambs* demonstrate, even within phobic schemas the heroine can be a resonant figure for queer audiences, gay males very much included. The last chapter will try to make sense of these discordant sites of affiliation and phobic disavowal.

Freud beyond the Return of the Repressed

Freud not only remains but also is perhaps especially useful for the study of modern horror. I want to take a moment here to clarify how, exactly, I believe Freud to be useful in this regard.

The horrifying return of something repressed, a central concept in Freud's theory of the uncanny, has taken on an uncanny life of its own in horror criticism. As any readings in horror-film criticism readily evince, Freud's famous 1919 essay "The Uncanny" has been especially influential for theorizations of the genre.¹ Rick Worland explains the deep significance of Freud's theory of the return of the repressed to horror: "Psychosexual traumas and conflicts experienced in childhood and as adults are never fully resolved; yet if left unrecognized or untreated such problems are bound to fester and return as neurotic symptoms, behaviors, and phobias." Freud's theories, Worland points out, have been broadened into a "sociopolitical critique" by recent horror critics, for whom the genre resonates with the return of any "number of [repressed] actions and desires."² This is certainly the view taken by Robin Wood in his influential writings on the horror film, in particular his essay "The American Nightmare," in which Wood popularized the notion of the uncanniness of horror and the return of the repressed as its defining feature.³

Several critics, however, have resisted the view Wood established. While Linda Badley writes of Freudian case histories, especially of hysterical women

patients, as early versions of horror narratives, symptomatic of the repression Freud saw as pervasive in the Victorian era, she nevertheless dissents from the view of horror as an enactment of the return of the repressed. Following Foucault's critique of what he called Freud's "repressive hypothesis," she claims instead that horror movies "do not testify to repressed sexuality but instead reflect our saturation with sexual images and options, a state of cultural hyper-consciousness, confusion, and terror."⁴ In *Skin Shows*, in which she argues that horror film flows from the nineteenth-century gothic novel, Judith Halberstam finds a different Freud useful to her argument. Drawing on Freud's theory of paranoia, especially in the Schreber case, she reads Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963) as a study in female paranoia.⁵ Beyond the uncanny, the return of the repressed, and paranoia, numerous studies locate in Freud's recurring theme of the "horror of incest"—most spectacularly represented in the Oedipus myth, the basis for Freud's most famous theory—a key source for horror film.

Unlike classical Hollywood horror—which focuses on disturbing figures (the uncanny monster, the mad scientist) and external threat (nuclear war, alien menaces)—modern horror principally treats the family and its attendant terrors. The oedipal aspect of a great deal of horror, particularly in its post-*Psycho* form, is richly apparent, given that the genre, especially in its modern cast, so resolutely plumbs the depths of familial anxieties. Major horror films made in the wake of *Psycho*, such as *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *The Exorcist*, *It's Alive*, *Carrie*, *The Fury*, *Halloween*, *Dressed to Kill*, *Friday the 13th*, *The Stepfather*, and others like them proceed from the basis of a crisis within the family structure, a crisis fundamental to the very constitution of the family. What primarily distinguishes modern from classic cinematic horror is the former's obsession with the family and its disruptions, as opposed to the latter's investments in the figure of the monster, usually tied to uncanny, fantastic, supernatural, or alien threats, in the form of vampires, werewolves, mummies, Frankenstein's monsters, cat women, wasp women, outer-space invaders, and so forth.

As I established in [Chapter 1](#), in this book I argue that the Oedipus myth is not the only mythological precedent for modern horror; indeed, it may even be secondary to another crucial precedent, the myth of Demeter and Persephone, a story of the abduction of a daughter, her enforced marriage, her mother's grief over her loss, the ominous nature of heterosexual relations insofar as the woman experiences them as compulsory, the uneasy compromise eventually effected between mother and husband over the fate of the daughter and, perhaps especially, the daughter's ambiguous response to the competing forces that determine her own experience and desires.

In her study *Deleuze and Horror*, Anna Powell writes that she moved away from Freud's structuralist critique and toward theorists like Deleuze because,

unlike Freud, they deal with “subjective loss.” In the following chapters, I demonstrate that Freud is fully a theorist of subjective loss, never more so than in his writings on the mother-daughter relationship. Though Freud’s writings on femininity are confused, frustrating, and at times offensive, they are more provocative and challenging, in my view, than has been usually acknowledged in the past four decades of revisionist Freudianism. I suggest that Freud’s writings on femininity provide resonant insights into the modern horror genre and its immediate precedents in the woman’s film and the Hitchcock thriller. Freud’s work provides a theoretical template for one of modern horror’s most fraught and recurrent themes: the child’s terror of the loss of relationship with his or her mother and the longing to reclaim it.

CHAPTER 3

Medusa in the Mirror

Brian De Palma's *Carrie*

Where is the ebullient woman, infinite woman who, immersed as she was in her naiveté, kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism, hasn't been ashamed of her strength? Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives . . . hasn't accused herself of being a monster?

—Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”

In her influential 1992 study of American horror films, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Carol J. Clover observes that, while studies have been made of Alfred Hitchcock's ambivalence toward his female characters, no such study has been made of Brian De Palma's.¹ Certainly, however, a critical consensus on the misogynistic sensibility of this still-active director (his latest films being *Redacted*, his multimedia 2007 film about the current Iraq War, and his 2006 adaptation of James Ellroy's 1987 noir novel *The Black Dahlia*) would appear to have been reached. In an essay on *Carrie* (De Palma, 1976), Shelley Stamp Lindsey excoriates the director for his demonization of Carrie's emergent female sexuality: “*Carrie* presents a masculine fantasy in which the feminine is constituted as horrific . . . the film presents female sexuality as monstrous and constructs femininity as a subject position impossible to occupy.”² Abigail Lynn Coykendall offered a more nuanced and complex but, ultimately, incoherent reading of *Carrie*, one that makes the fatal critical error of collapsing the film's sensibility with that of its source material. In an important essay on masochism in the monster film, Aviva Briefel encouragingly challenges Lindsey's schematic reading but essentially draws the same general conclusions about the significance of the film.³

In my view, De Palma's depiction of women has often been misunderstood.⁴ He doesn't exude a misogynistic hatred toward women—far from it. Rather, his position toward them is one of rivalrous and ambivalent identification. He empathizes with their position in patriarchy, affirms and identifies with their desire to transgress against its strictures, especially in matters of sexuality, and then—for the mingled reasons of his pessimism and his profound ambivalence—pulls back to watch the ramifications of their intransigence, often dire if not utterly fatal. In his great horror films of the 1970s—*Sisters* (1973), *Obsession* (1976), *Carrie*, and *The Fury* (1978)—and in several films afterward, including *Dressed to Kill* (1980) and *Femme Fatale* (2002)—women dominate the action and defy male power, even if the penalty is sometimes death. If De Palma is freaked out by female power, he is also enraptured by it.

Carrie provides De Palma with an extraordinary opportunity to negotiate his conflictual feelings toward women. Based on Stephen King's novel but remarkably different from it in tone and effect, De Palma's *Carrie* unfolds like a fusion of the Cinderella fairy tale, the woman's film melodrama, Grand Guignol theater, and Greek mythology and tragedy. The film crosses the Demeter and Persephone myth with the Medusa and the Medea myths, fusing all with gothic horror. Somehow, the film seamlessly integrates this clashing mixture of tones and themes. Yet *Carrie* remains the ultimate split text, forever at odds with itself, *looking, as Carrie does, at itself looking at itself*.

Its fusion of tones complements its polyglot origins. De Palma's shaggy, 1960s counterculture sensibility, emblemized by his early, Vietnam War-era films such as the comedies *Greetings* (1968) and *Hi, Mom!* (1970), manifests itself in even his most somber and frighteningly intense works. The scenes between Carrie White (Sissy Spacek), a shy, awkward, lonely girl, mercilessly abused by her high-school classmates, with the power to move objects telekinetically, through force of the mind, and her mother, Margaret White (Piper Laurie), a fundamentalist Christian as tormented by the religiosity with which she torments her daughter, hover tonally between comedy and despair. But as the film develops, it is this despair that emerges as the deeper and finally the utterly pervasive tone.

In one key moment of the film, the titular heroine, having been humiliated by both her fellow students and her mother, stares at herself in the mirror. Carrie has internalized the messages of hate directed at her, both for her physical ineptitude and for her menstruating body. As Spacek plays the scene, Carrie, weeping and staring at herself in disgust, appears to be experiencing *shame*, a condition that both the social order and her mother, from wildly distinct yet ultimately similar motives, have attempted to inculcate in her. But Carrie's rage fights against this shame even as her shame threatens to overwhelm her. The shot of Carrie looking in the mirror (in which a drawing of Jesus is reflected) is

intercut with one of her mother at her sewing machine. De Palma establishes a tension between Carrie, the modern woman contemplating the incomprehensibly divergent yet unified demands on her identity, and Mrs. White, the traditional (though, as we will see, also defiantly berserk) woman employed in the conventionally gender-specific task of sewing. We hear a shattering sound and something else, the shriek of violins. Her mother comes up to inspect the situation, failing to see what we see after she leaves: the simultaneously *restored and shattered* mirror. It is this cohesive-shattered image that will be the template for the formal design and thematic concerns of the film. It is also an apposite visual complement to the myth of Demeter and Persephone, so central to the woman's film and modern horror, an image of union and loss at once.

Splitting the Screen

Like the wetness of water or the viscosity of blood, the theme of splitting permeates *Carrie*. In the famous split-screen prom-destruction sequence, the film makes the daring decision to employ a split-screen just at the moment of greatest narrative tension and release, dissociating us from the horror that ensues as its heroine unleashes her apocalyptic wrath. Yet the prom sequence is only the most explicit and well-known manifestation of the theme of splitting in *Carrie*. Throughout the film—and throughout his career—De Palma creates images that split themselves, bifurcated views in which one or several characters are cut off from, in opposition to, or in a mirroring relationship to the others, often through his use of split screen but through other methods as well, such as the split-diopter lens. As a technique, the split screen dates back to the silent cinema, most notably the films of Abel Gance; it is fitting that for a film that reaches into ancient roots, De Palma reaches into the origins of cinema, employing a technique that conveys a desire to realize the potentialities of film. Given the valences between *Carrie* and Greek myth, it is not surprising that De Palma returns to the split-screen technique he employed in his filmed version of the stage play *Dionysus in '69*, a retelling of Euripides's tragedy *The Bacchae* (date of premiere 405 BCE).⁵ One of the most striking overlaps between his Dionysus and *Carrie* is the image of a bloody red hand rising up.⁶ This hand represents De Palma's control over his own bloody narratives, the anguish and the violence in his art.⁷ It is both a recurring motif in De Palma, appearing in just about every one of his Hitchcockian psychosexual thrillers, and a link between De Palma's films and tragedy in its classical and later versions. De Palma films recall the art of the Roman tragedian Seneca and Shakespeare; the blood-drenched emotionalism of his films evokes the unstanchable wounds and indelible stains of tragic drama.

One of the major thematic concerns of the film is authorship; the split screen can be said to be a visual representation of the splitting of authorial control between De Palma and his vibrant, formidable female characters. De Palma saturates the film *generally* with split images, through his use of the split diopter. A special camera lens with two focal distances, the split diopter allows objects at different distances from the camera (usually on the left and right side of the screen) to be in simultaneous focus. De Palma uses the split-diopter effect to convey visually subterranean levels of meaning. In one scene—the one in which Carrie quietly calls aureole-blond jock Tommy Ross's (plagiarized) poem beautiful and is then mocked by a surprisingly cruel English teacher—we see not only Tommy in close-up but also Carrie behind him. In this split-diopter lens image, Carrie appears to symbolize Tommy's feminine side, his anima, the better part of himself, and it visually establishes and anticipates the bond that they will develop at the prom. Here, in this scene, Tommy reacts against the teacher's vitriol, saying, "You suck" under his breath as the teacher mocks Carrie. But as with all images, split or otherwise, in De Palma, we can never be sure what we're seeing or getting. Tommy quickly crumples into moronic frat laughter, as if he's instantly forgotten his moment of empathy.

Carrie obsessively thematizes splitting in myriad forms: an internal split, in which a character is divided from herself; an intersubjective split, in which a fatal rift prevents any sustained intimacy between one or more persons; a social split between a person and her larger community; and an ideological split between one belief system and another. Moreover, on a metatextual level, the film represents a split that is both a divide and an attempt at unification, the director's highly productive *agon* with a cinematic predecessor obsessed with similar subjects and equally adept at realizing them in the cinematic flesh. De Palma's obsession with the cinema of Alfred Hitchcock reaches an especially feverish and eloquent early height in *Carrie*. Here a comparison with Seneca seems to me to be particularly apt—just as Seneca rewrote classic Greek tragedy with a new emphasis on extreme imagery, figured in bloodletting, De Palma reimagines Hitchcock's thrillers as blood thrillers. In neither artist's case is the bloodletting gratuitous; rather, blood serves as a marker of emotional as well as corporeal and social extremes, all of which hit their breaking point, and then some, in Senecan tragedy and De Palma thrillers alike.

In *Carrie*, De Palma intertextually extends, deepens, reassembles, and scrambles Hitchcock's career-long concerns with femininity and identification, taking them to a wrenchingly personal level in which they become *his* concerns, *his* obsessions. In *Carrie*, De Palma most boldly reimagines the Hitchcockian psychosexual thriller as his own. *Carrie*'s most potent theme, however, and the one that will be the chief focus of this chapter, is the violent splitting of the mother-daughter relationship in patriarchy. *Carrie*, as I

have been suggesting throughout this study, takes the themes of the woman's film—the mother-daughter relationship, transformation, the Fury—to a dizzying and disturbing height.

Original Cut

The film bears similarity to Sigmund Freud's theory of the female Oedipus complex, which he addressed in several writings from the 1920s onward, most significantly in his 1925 essay "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," to which we return later in this chapter. Female oedipal development is a theme De Palma explored with dreamlike intentness, albeit primarily in terms of the daughter-father relationship, in his previous film, *Obsession*, a highly self-conscious reimagining of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), written by Paul Schrader. De Palma's *Carrie* is a parallel narrative to *Obsession*, but one that eclipses the role of the father, focusing intently on relationships between women, especially the mother-daughter bond.⁸ In so doing, the film deploys Freudian theories of the transformation of femininity into properly oedipalized womanhood with a savage force that takes these theories to their absurdly logical height and holds them, and their implications, to a new critical scrutiny. *Carrie* unsettles the oedipal narrative into which Freud inserted female psychosexual development. The film demands—by manifesting—a different mythic narrative of feminine identity and power from the Freudian oedipal one, one that nods toward an alternative archetypal narrative: the myth of Persephone, her abduction by Hades to the underworld, and her mother Demeter's world-destroying grief.

I argue that *Carrie*, like several De Palma films, thematizes the potential anguish in the process of what Margaret S. Mahler has called *separation-individuation*, in which the child emerges as a separate individual from the initial phase of mother-child symbiosis. In the initial phase, the child had experienced the mother and herself as one indivisible being, a collapse of self and object, the mother as extension of the child's own body.⁹ In her study *Remembering the Phallic Mother*, Marcia Ian describes the phallus as the phobic screen for something else: the umbilical cord, which literalizes and symbolizes the trauma of birth and our separation from the mother. Ian's reading challenges the Freudian theory of castration (the recognition that the mother lacks a penis) as the original trauma that shapes subjectivity.¹⁰ The Persephone myth, which *Carrie* retools, expresses the core emotions of this traumatic separation. As I will argue throughout this chapter, the fundamental trauma of the separation of the child from the mother—a traumatic event for both child *and* mother—is the original split that informs this film and, as I will suggest, De Palma's cinema as a whole.

Formally and symbolically, *Carrie* thematizes the mother-child split through an obsessive cinematic design of relentless visual and metaphorical splitting.

Mothers and Daughters: Myth, Psychoanalysis, and Splitting

Given that De Palma has, much more intensely than even Hitchcock, long been associated in certain quarters with misogyny, it seems relevant to discuss him in relation to Freud. Freud remains one of the most controversial theoreticians of sexuality, especially when it comes to the discussion of female sexuality, and his difficult treatment of the oedipal complex for girls remains deeply controversial. Without discounting the problems of Freud's sexism, I would argue that we can say he exposes the effects of misogyny at the same time as he constructs them. In any event, his theory of female oedipal development casts a relevant light on *Carrie*.

In his 1925 essay "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," Freud explores masculine and feminine identities within patriarchy. Writing of penis envy—a theory that can only be recuperated as "desire for power in our culture," as Freud's French reinterpreter Jacques Lacan did—Freud remarks that one of its consequences "seems to be a loosening of the girl's relation with her mother as a love-object."¹¹ In the tragic terms Freud lays out, the development of femininity derives in the girl from

her narcissistic sense of humiliation which is bound up with penis-envy, the reminder that after all this is a point on which she cannot compete with boys and that it would therefore be best for her to give up the idea of doing so. Thus the little girl's recognition of the anatomical distinction between the sexes forces her away from masculinity and masculine masturbation on to new lines which lead to the development of femininity. [The thus far unseen manifestation of the Oedipus complex now occurs when] . . . the girl's libido slips into a new position along the line—there is no other way of putting it—of the equation "penis = child." She gives up her wish for a penis and puts in place of it a wish for a child: and *with that purpose in view* she takes her father as a love-object. Her mother becomes the object of her jealousy. The girl has turned into a little woman.¹²

Reading Freud against the blindnesses of his own argument, we can posit that he theorizes the *emotional and social consequences of the construction of femininity within patriarchy*, the *enforced* separation between mothers and daughters (which also must occur, with equally traumatic but differently registered resonances, between sons and mothers). If the Oedipus complex provocatively illustrates the male process of socialization, what Freud might have more properly been describing here—had he not attempted to shoehorn femininity into his version of the Oedipus narrative—is the *Persephone Complex*, the inevitable,

ineluctably tragic dissolution of the daughter-mother bond necessitated by the daughter's journey away from the mother into the social order, which the Greek myth of Persephone's abduction hauntingly symbolizes.

Lacan's theory of the child's passage from the originary world of the mother (prelinguistic, associated with sensations, sounds, feelings) to the symbolic world of the father (language, rationality, law)—a retooling of Freud's Oedipus complex that emphasizes the signal importance of language over the Freudian focus on the biological—remains a frustratingly apt and succinct account of the normative socialization of the individual subject, who must renounce his or her maternal ties in order to enter the legitimizing realm of the patriarchal order. This passage is harrowing enough for the male, who must identify with the same masculine, paternal force he competed against and feared would destroy him; it is close to annihilating for the female, who must not only simultaneously identify with and reject her mother but somehow grope her way toward the mother's own ambivalent social status: enshrined as domestic angel and procreative icon, but limited always to these roles. One of the chief insights of psychoanalytic theory, at its most useful, is that the "normative" exacts a fairly traumatic toll from an individual subject, especially a female one, forced to inhabit an essentially paralytic psychic and social identity. Margaret White identifies with patriarchal sexism, but Carrie wants to break free of her mother's internalized misogyny.

While mothers in American culture have certainly been ennobled, there also exists the fearful image of the mother as an archaic maw that threatens to engulf her child and reabsorb her into her own primal system. Film theorist Barbara Creed makes this female figure her chief focus in her study *The Monstrous-Feminine*, reformulating Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection to theorize the horror genre. Creed parses the Kristevan theory of abjection within the mother-child relationship this way:

In the child's attempts to break away, the mother becomes an "abject"; thus, in this context, where the child attempts to become a separate subject, abjection becomes "*a precondition of narcissism.*" Once again we can see abjection at work in the horror text where the child struggles to break away from the mother, representative of the archaic maternal figure [for Creed, the *Alien* films are exemplary in this regard], in a context in which the father is invariably absent (*Psycho*, *Carrie*, *The Birds*). In these films the maternal figure is constructed as the monstrous-feminine. By refusing to relinquish her hold on her child, she prevents it from taking its proper place in relation to the symbolic [as Lacan described, the world of the Father's Law of language and reason]. [The child is] partly consumed by a desire to remain locked in a blissful relationship to the mother and partly terrified by separation . . . Kristeva argues that a whole area of religion has assumed the function of tackling this danger.¹³

As Creed quotes Kristeva, “this is precisely where we encounter the rituals of defilement,” which all converge on the conflation of the maternal and the abject. “The function of these religious rituals is to ward off the subject’s fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother.”¹⁴

While I concur with Creed that the horror genre represents a phobic image of the mother, I also think the horror genre attempts to express the psychological anguish that can also occur within the profound—even suffocating—intimacy between children and parents. In our culture that essentially equates motherhood with care, nurture, and emotional training, the mother-child bond is especially freighted with significance. Moreover, it is, simultaneously, culturally enforced and culturally abnegated, made all important *and* a stage from which the child must be weaned, a stage the child must be trained *to desire to reject*. Little wonder that a potential for deep ambivalence inheres within the mother-child bond along with intimacy and love, perhaps especially because of the depth of these affectional ties.

Despite the lapses of psychoanalysis, it serves a vital function in its attempt to theorize such relationships; if classical psychoanalysis fails to include the social in its formulations, a film like *Carrie* adds this dimension to the psychoanalytic portrait of the mother-daughter bond. Though it moves well beyond the breaking point of its own frenzied passion and anguish, the bond between Carrie and her mother also exists in the social order, and the film registers the severity of the cut through their bond that the social order demands. When Mrs. White, after learning that Carrie has menstruated for the first time, says to Carrie, “You’re a woman now,” she speaks with an awareness that Carrie’s womanhood is the force that will take Carrie *away from her*. The film concerns itself with the emotional impact on the mother of the daughter’s Persephone-like “abduction” by the social order, the anguished loss of the tie between mother and daughter as the daughter makes her way into the world, a way clearly marked in patriarchy as the progression to the domestic sphere of marriage and family and away from the mother. Adrienne Rich has famously and perceptively called this phenomenon “compulsory heterosexuality.”¹⁵ Like Hades in the Persephone myth, the social order performs the function of removing the daughter from the mother; but what *Carrie* also registers is the daughter’s desire for sexual knowledge and fulfillment. The tricky balance the film strikes is that it leaves as an open question *what*, exactly, the terms of this sexual knowledge will be. Does Carrie want heterosexual romance or something different? In sum, what does *Carrie* want?

Before I can attempt to offer an answer to this question, I need to distinguish my project from that of Creed, who addresses similar themes in the film but in ways that differ significantly from my own. The Kristevan theme on which Creed draws—“the subject’s fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother,” as Kristeva puts it—provides for a brilliant reinterpretation

of the horror film.¹⁶ In Creed's hands, the image of femininity in horror gains complexity as we are forced to recognize that horror film derives a great deal of its force from the *fear* of woman's power, her power to castrate, the mother's power to subsume the subject, rather than exclusively from the fear that the woman will be destroyed, rendered the annihilated victim. These are two sides, for Creed, of the misogynistic coin, for the fear of woman's power is no less antiwoman than the victimization model. Creed does importantly illuminate that other side, the relay between a victimized and a terrifying, annihilating image of woman.

But as Creed's discussion of *Carrie* amply demonstrates, her reformulations have some serious limitations, for they fail to plumb the deepest levels of a work such as De Palma's film. In part, this failure lies in Creed's model. Kristeva's view of the mother's world as "a universe without shame" and the father's world as "a universe of shame" in no way illuminates *Carrie*, which if anything squarely associates shame with the mother and actually comes close to suggesting that the father's symbolic world may provide a means of transcending this shame—volatile, to be sure, responses to theories of the socialization of gender.¹⁷ The more recent feminist psychoanalytic work of Mary Ayers on the role mother-infant attachment plays in shame provides a more resonant insight into De Palma's film. "When the maternal intrapsychic conflicts that influence the mother-infant relationship become impingements that in turn become a pattern, the details of the way in which the impingement is sensed by the infant are significant, as well as the infant's reaction to them." The ways in which a child can respond to such emotional abandonment are myriad, and gender and culture will shape the response. Shame, in other words, is deeply caught up in the mother-child relationship.¹⁸

A thematic movement that "suggests symbolically a return to the womb," as Creed would have it, does indeed motivate *Carrie*. But the film does not ultimately offer a "final statement of complete surrender to the power of the maternal entity."¹⁹ What Creed schematically reads as the film's ineluctable movement toward this resolution is one of the most contested and anguished struggles thematized in the film, one left wholly irresolvable: far from returning its protagonist and us to the womb, the film represents this return and the desires aroused by it in highly complex, ambivalent terms. In other words, rather than being a vehicle of return to origins, the film explores the tremendous ambivalence on the part of its protagonist as well as her mother over the entire mother-child bond, depicted as something both women cherish and abhor at once. Most important, the film emphasizes not return, with its suggestion of engulfment, but separation, splitting, the fatal cut that separates child from mother. This cut informs a series of thematic and stylistic elements of the film. The mother-daughter cut is both the chief trauma around which the

film circles and an allegory of the acutest kind for the general human failure of connection, the impossibility of genuine intimacy and sustained kinship, the tendencies toward duplicity and even more harrowing levels of betrayal that characterize relationships in De Palma films, a view of the social that De Palma represents in a cinema of splits and cuts; jagged, violent disruptions and juxtapositions; of the film itself rendered a stranger to itself, a distorted mirror of its own filmic identity. As I will elaborate later in this chapter, the figure that recurs in De Palma's film and that synthesizes all of these concerns is *the failed pietà*, the image of attempted but unsustainable, unrealizable connection, resonant with an enduring tradition in Western art of the mother-child bond at its most plangent and sorrowful, as deep connection and deepest loss at once.

I will now proceed to offer a series of readings of the film that ultimately support a close reading of the prom-destruction sequence and also suggest that this sequence is only the most vivid explication of the film's aesthetic and thematic preoccupation with splitting.

Autoerotic Plenitude and the Maenads

The film opens with an image, from a high-angle long shot, of division: two volleyball teams of female teens competing on either side of a net. That this image of competitiveness within a same-sex sphere commences the film is not incidental; this is not Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's female world of love and ritual but the ritualized violence inherent, in the imaginations of artists like Herman Melville and Brian De Palma, in homosocialized spaces.²⁰ Then again this vision of division narrows down from a general one within a group to the more specific one between a young girl and this group of her peers. Suddenly, the camera isolates Carrie White, targeted as the one who will fail the group (her team), struggling like a wounded member of the herd to keep up, with the crucial distinction being that, far from shielding her from predators, the herd *is* her predator. A litany of abusive remarks and an array of assaultive glares and shoves issue forth from the lines of angry girls who blame Carrie for the loss of the game, Carrie forced to withstand them all. The teen villainess Chris Hargensen (Nancy Allen, smudgily blonde, moist, and memorably malevolent) provides the final blow: "*You eat shit.*" This verbal condemnation speaks volumes of histories of hate. It evokes verbally what the film will evoke symbolically, the association of female sexuality with unspeakable abjection, a point that Creed importantly makes. Clearly, Carrie takes on the role of scapegoat for the girls' anxieties about their own sexuality—hence the number of shots of women aghast at the sight of Carrie's blood, especially when its residue is left on their own white clothing. The film catalogues an entire history of misogynistic motifs and phobic reactions to women and femininity: the image of the menstruating woman as a

source of contagion, fear, and disgust; the association of female sexuality with beastliness, particularly in the figure of the sow or pig (a trope in *The Exorcist* as well) whose blood will symbolize the dread of female sexuality and menstruation; related to this, the satanic associations of all these symbols and the phobic construction of woman as witch.²¹ But what's especially provocative here—in a work that is a male fantasy of women and female experience—is that all of these phobic anxieties *emanate from the female sphere itself*. Carrie's connection to other women is presented as the height of *disconnection*.

In the film's first image, an intragroup split transforms into an individual-group one. The film's first sequence not only recapitulates but also reorients this relay of splitting. As De Palma's languorous, dreamlike slow-motion camera floats through the steaming locker room in which girls undress, dress, emerge from the shower, we have bifurcated rows of girls, the undressed and the dressed, the nude and the seminude. The atmosphere recalls classical myth, the eros, but also the dread associated with such images; in the Victorian artist John Waterhouse's 1896 oil painting *Hylas and the Nymphs*, a young man is lured into the water by a group of water maidens, who will drown him. But there is no Hylas here, only the nymphs and their soft menace—and Carrie. When De Palma's camera finds Carrie, she is this time in total isolation, almost invisible within the steam-engulfed frame in which we have yet another of an endless series of splits, that between the collective eroticism of the girls and the autoerotic plenitude of Carrie in her own private shower-world. A multiple shower-head beam the length of the screen bifurcates the image, much as the telephone pole does the image of Marion Crane asleep in her car on the sun-blasted highway in *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960). This massively phallic beam adorned with multiple shower-head phalli obtrudes like an apparatus from the Inquisition, the sadomasochistic resonance of which deepens the intensely autoerotic spectacle of Carrie showering. Yet this hyperphallic emblem sprays pleasure rather than implements death.

De Palma's representation of Carrie here utterly distinguishes his version of the character from Stephen King's. King describes his Carrie in a manner meant to evoke as much revulsion in the reader as it does in her tormentors; De Palma, on the other hand, idealizes the naked Carrie and—this is a crucial point—*shares in her autoerotic self-fulfillment*, her dream of oneness and erotic self-connectivity.²² De Palma is a 1960s counterculture believer in the myth of sex as liberation; he's also a tormented Catholic who struggles with the sense of sex as sin, a view that he defends against through the alternate strategies of idealization and coarse humor. Through interlocking personal and public mechanisms of condemnation, Carrie is denied access to her body and its pleasures. She allegorizes the classic psychoanalytic split subject who can never know her essential, unconscious self, but, more importantly beyond this, her adventurous

desire to access the full range of her corporeality encounters social ban and maternal prohibition, the full opprobrium of Western phobias about female sexuality.

If girls, as Freud's theory of the female Oedipus complex would have it, must reject "masculinizing" masturbation to develop along the track of femininity, De Palma would appear to align himself with Carrie on a search for her authentic self *through* self-pleasure, and seeing any bars to this self-knowledge as the result of stifling social ban. Carrie's body itself shatters the membrane of ignorance that has been kept between Carrie and the world.²³ When she menstruates, she believes she is dying; De Palma conveys the shock force of this impression by shattering the onanistic, oneiric dream world of Carrie's shower with a return to "normal" expressed through a jarring transition to a *cinéma-vérité* style, handheld-camera footage of Carrie, screaming and bleeding, crying, "Help me!" to her unfeeling classmates. Worse than unfeeling, they pelt her with tampons, derisively cackling, "Plug it up, plug it up!" The split between dreamlike autoerotic plenitude and real life could not be starker or more violent, as registered in the shift from Carrie's soft, supple body in the shower and her defenseless and unidealized bareness now.

Entering the scene is one of the film's most complex, troubling, and ambivalently regarded figures, the gym teacher, Miss Collins (Betty Buckley). In that as a mother figure she doubles for Mrs. White, providing a seeming alternative to her, Miss Collins represents the second half of a split mother in the film, the Good versus the Terrible Mother. But she is not the Good to Mrs. White's Terrible Mother—far from it. Rather, each figure combines, to a greater or lesser degree, good and terrible elements, and the film may even regard Miss Collins with more skeptical eyes than it does Carrie's mother.

The Nurse Witch

Miss Collins, the gym teacher, notices the girls screaming, "Plug it up, plug it up!" and goes to investigate. She interrogates Sue Snell (Amy Irving) first, asking her, "What are you doing?" As Sue fumbles in response, Miss Collins intensifies her interrogation: "*What are you doing?*" she says, violently shaking Sue. Miss Collins's increasingly violent temperament will be one of the key emotional registers of the film; a fundamentally split character, she oscillates between modes of tender nurture and violent reproof. The pragmatism of her initial response to Carrie, screaming in the corner for help, borders on the censorious: "Now grow up, take care of yourself, grow up." Carrie's telekinetic frustration (it bursts a light bulb above them) cuts through the communicative impasse between the women, forcing Miss Collins to understand that Carrie, kept ignorant of the body's knowledge, really does believe she's dying. When

Miss Collins does finally realize this, she embraces Carrie, whimpering like the small child to which she's been reduced. This hard-won, faltering embrace will be the first of several significant such gestures in the film. They are examples of what I call the *failed pietà*: a half-completed, inadequately realized or motivated, or tonally ruptured embrace that combines love with its opposite, hate or indifference.

Miss Collins resembles the ambiguous figure of the nurse from such tragedies as Euripides's *Hippolytus* (first performed in 428 BCE) or Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1591–95, exact date unknown), a figure who not only nurtures the young but also foments discord, even havoc, in their lives, mainly through her own ambivalence toward them, the confusion between her self-sacrificing desire to help the young, desiring lovers and her own repressed appetite for their erotic energy. Like the witch, the nurse combines occult properties with those of a caregiver; as a nurse-witch figure, Miss Collins combines nurture with negation; loving, protective feelings with a rage that almost approaches that of Carrie and her mother. This rage dramatically bursts out in her taunting, tormenting tone as she berates the girls for their treatment of Carrie. Richly deserving of her castigation, the girls nevertheless visibly quake and wilt in the full face of her rage to a degree that begins to suggest they are not so much Carrie's victimizers as they are the victims of their educator's confused desires. (It is not the main focus of the present chapter, but I regard *Carrie* as a richly productive text for queer readings, and Miss Collins, coded as lesbian, as a crucial figure for such readings.)

Though Miss Collins has moral right on her side, the excess of her emotional investment in disciplining the girls becomes undeniably apparent when she brutally slaps intransigent Chris during the gym detention that Miss Collins runs. One could say that both Carrie and Chris—now Carrie's strange double—go to the prom in retaliation against a terrible mother, one for the promise of love, the other for the triumph of hate.

Margaret and Marnie

The themes of the film correspond closely, as I have suggested, to the Persephone myth. In this myth, Hades, the god of the underworld, abducts, rapes, and makes his queen Persephone, the maiden daughter of Demeter, the earth goddess of grain, fertility, and the seasons. Demeter roams the earth, searching for her daughter; in her grieving wrath, she turns the world to ice. Finally, in this myth about the origins of the seasons, a pact of sorts is made: Persephone will spend half the year with her mother and the other half with Hades. *Carrie* evokes the key themes of this myth: the daughter's abduction, the mother's despair over it, and her nuclear-winter wrath.

It's impossible to imagine *Carrie* working as well as it does without the accomplished acting of its players, especially Spacek in the title role and Piper Laurie as her mother, Margaret White. An entire study of the delicacy, passion, and range of these great performances should be written; for now, let me emphasize that their contributions shape the film as much as De Palma's visual designs do. The way Laurie plays Margaret White, she's a sexphobic woman obsessed with sexuality, specifically her own. When Carrie comes home after her humiliation in the shower and tearfully rebukes her mother—"You should have *told* me, Mamma"—the mother's reaction is to slap her, which knocks Carrie to the ground. This is the second failed *pietà* in the film: what should be a warm, intimate, restorative embrace splinters apart into violence and disconnection, as Margaret drags Carrie (pointedly) to her closet to pray.

After Tommy Ross invites her to the prom (unbeknownst to Carrie, at his girlfriend Sue Snell's request), Carrie tellingly asks her mother over dinner, "Mamma, please tell me that I have to try to be a whole person," making her case for why her mother should allow her to attend the prom. "Boys," the mother begins cackling. "After the blood come the boys, like sniffing dogs—it's that smell, they want to see where that *smell* comes from." No one in the film exhibits more urgent misogyny than Carrie's mother but, as Laurie plays the role (as opposed to Patricia Clarkson in her more cerebral interpretation in the 2002 television version of King's novel), we are made aware that Margaret eroticizes her own phobia about the female body, veritably quakes with the knowledge of sex she repudiates. When she beholds Carrie wearing a pink dress on the night of the prom, she says (in a line Laurie fought to keep in the film), "Red. I might have known it would be red."²⁴ Looking at Carrie's chest, she says, "I can see your dirty pillows." But there's more going on still. Before Tommy picks up Carrie, Margaret becomes increasingly desperate, finally revealing her genuine concern for her daughter: "They're all going to laugh at you." "It's not too late," she says to Carrie, "you can stay here with me." "I don't *want* to stay with you, Mamma." *Carrie* innovates the Persephone myth by giving Persephone her own agency—Carrie *wants* to leave the mother. But there's nothing triumphant in the film's depiction of this struggle between them; it registers the psychic wounds of the split between mother and daughter, the daughter's longing for a wholeness she can realize, the mother's desire to keep her daughter wholly to herself. Moreover, desires to stay with and be comforted by her mother suffuse Carrie's desire to leave her mother behind and to become a "whole person"—a nonsplit subject. One is reminded of Charlotte Vale's conflicted desires in *Now, Voyager* for "single blessedness" and for her mother's love, a conflict doubled in her tyrannical and also strangely protective and devoted mother's own desires for her daughter.

Most resonant of all, the film that *Carrie* evokes and reimagines is Hitchcock's *Marnie* (1964), as a narrative in which the daughter wants to break free of

the mother rather than return to her. *Psycho* is another obvious intertext for the film—Carrie is a shy and lonely outcast, much like Norman Bates, and attends Bates High School; a crazed mother figure murderously wields a knife—but it is *Marnie* that looms most prominently above *Carrie*. In Hitchcock's film, Marnie (Tippi Hedren), having internalized all of her mother's hatred of men and her belief that women should have nothing to do with them, desperately longs to be loved by her cold, unyielding (but privately tormented) mother. A thief who steals from her corporate employers, Marnie experiences periodic episodes in which memories of childhood trauma overwhelm her, memories triggered by the sight of the color red. Hitchcock vividly conveys the force and fear of Marnie's feelings through the expressionistic scarlet suffusions that engulf the image when Marnie encounters the color red.²⁵

In *Carrie*, the heroine combines mother-obsessed Norman Bates and Marnie with a new, self-affirming investment in her own body and her sexuality, counterculture feminist values that De Palma identifies with and affirms. If in *Marnie* the color red symbolizes childhood trauma, in *Carrie* it signifies the wound of the daughter's separation from the mother but, more complexly, the internalized misogyny that the mother has attempted to inculcate in her daughter. We previously had occasion to note Lacan's well-known theory of the subject's entrance into symbolic order. In Lacanian terms, for proper socialization to occur, we must pass from the mother's prelinguistic world of sensations and feelings into the father's world of law, reason, and, most important, language (the symbolic). The mother's world, left behind, comes to seem inferior to the father's world of rationality, order, language, law. Margaret White joins in with the social order's devaluation of women and mothers and mother-child bonds by identifying with the worst cultural attitudes toward women and female sexuality. Her views about sexuality and the "father's"—the social order's—views about sexuality here coalesce; the mother's ideology only mirrors the misogynistic messages about women within patriarchy that she has so utterly absorbed and with which she passionately identifies. *Carrie* thematizes internalized misogyny and its harrowing intergenerational legacies.

The blood that falls on Carrie is a highly complex and ambivalent symbol that defies a single interpretation.²⁶ In at least one sense, the blood engulfs Carrie in ancient ritual and ancient femininities, recalling the ritual of the Thesmophoria that we discussed in [Chapter 2](#), evoking the theme of the potential violence of female sexuality. It also bathes Carrie in knowledge of patriarchal misogyny, shared by her mother, anxiously defended against by the social order, which uses Carrie as scapegoat to expiate its own maddening, gnawing anxieties about the hypocrisy, the penchant for violence and mayhem, at its core. Hypocrisy and betrayal are, perhaps, the central themes of De Palma's oeuvre. Carrie is forced to undergo her humiliation so that the social order can remain ignorant

of its most fervent and artfully maintained designs, as I will demonstrate. But the blood also has a will of its own, its own agency—it seems to want Carrie for itself.

De Palma's Screen and Medusa's Gaze

In some of the most spellbinding sequences of his career, in which Carrie and Tommy Ross (William Katt) are elected prom king and queen, Carrie's fairy tale, Cinderella happiness is shattered by the successful completion of Chris's revenge plot. When Carrie, covered in blood, unleashes her wrath, De Palma uses the Hitchcockian technique of pure cinema to give us an overwhelmingly distinct array of perspectives, emotional registers, desires, and effects. Carrie at the prom looks like Medusa before the curse, shimmering in rosaceous beauty; with the blood on her, she resembles the Medusa whose look can kill, even as she wields the retributive might of the Erinyes, which, as we discussed in [Chapter 2](#), in Greek literally means “the angry ones,” the Furies who effect divine punishment (little wonder that the title to De Palma's next film is *The Fury*). Carrie, like Medusa, suffers for the sin of femininity itself—she suffers for *the condition of femininity in patriarchy*. But she also wields Medusa's, Athena's, and the Furies' power to destroy—not Cixous's beautiful, laughing Medusa but the Medusa of Greek myth itself.

As Ovid presents the myth of Medusa, Medusa is the victim of both male *and* female oppression:

Medusa once had charms; to gain her love
 A rival crowd of envious lovers strove.
 They, who have seen her, own, they ne'er did trace
 More moving features in a sweeter face.
 Yet above all, her length of hair, they own,
 In golden ringlets wav'd, and graceful shone.
 Her Neptune saw, and with such beauties fir'd,
 Resolv'd to compass, what his soul desir'd.
 In chaste Minerva's fane, he, lustful, stay'd,
 And seiz'd, and rifled the young, blushing maid.
 The bashful Goddess turn'd her eyes away,
 Nor durst such bold impurity survey;
 But on the ravish'd virgin vengeance takes,
 Her shining hair is chang'd to hissing snakes.
 These in her Aegis Pallas joys to bear,
 The hissing snakes her foes more sure ensnare,
 Than they did lovers once, when shining hair. (Dryden's
 translation)

Carrie's version of the Medusa myth corresponds both to Freud's theoretical explanation of it in his essay on the Medusa's Head—as a representation of the terrifying qualities of the mother's genitals, separated from their erotically pleasurable ones—and to Cixous's, as the power of femininity misread by men as fear, fright, and shame.²⁷ But De Palma's film most directly engages with the Ovidian understanding of Medusa.

Medusa is a beautiful woman destroyed both by the monstrous rapacity of patriarchy and by the allegiance to patriarchal logic on the part of the phallic mother. If we read Mrs. White as a modern, failed version of Athena, the virgin goddess, who punishes Carrie for the social position of femininity in patriarchy, then we can read Carrie as Medusa, the object of fused patriarchal and father-identified female wrath. But the difference here is that Carrie is no mere Medusa enacting this phallic female's own hatred of her sex; rather, she is both this *and* an autonomous female force wielding her own Fury. The film finds a filmic means of representing Carrie's Medusan duality or, more properly put, the dual Medusas she embodies.

Carrie's transition from rapturous joy to abjection to monstrosity encompasses the joy and the anguish and the violence inherent in De Palma's filmmaking. When Chris pulls the rope and appears to experience violent orgasmic release; Sue Snell veers between joyful contentment at seeing Carrie so radiantly happy to horror at realizing that Chris and Billy Nolan (John Travolta), her dim-witted boyfriend, lurk beneath the stage, ready to pull the rope of the pig's blood bucket; Carrie yields to the joy of her coronation; Carrie transforms into a Fury: De Palma shares in each disparate, dichotomous reaction. Each of these female characters fascinates him in their fulfillment as types of female power and, moreover, as *author figures*, each of whom attempts to wrest control over narrative (as Miss Collins and Mrs. White also do). It is with Carrie's accession to author—an accession De Palma facilitates, thwarts, and joins—that De Palma experiences his greatest filmmaking joy and terror.

In a bravura tracking shot, the camera follows the successful completion of the revenge plot. Two of Chris's coconspirators, Norma (played by the marvelously lively, red-baseball-capped P. J. Soles), and her boyfriend, beefy Freddy, gather up the ballots, first getting Carrie's and Tommy's (Tommy, golden embodiment of the social order, having convinced Carrie to "vote for ourselves"). They dump the ballots and replace them with their own duplicitous ones that ensure Carrie and Tommy as winner, and hand these ballots to the judges, including Miss Collins. The camera pushes past the judges at their table to go past the stage, behind which we see Sue Snell sneaking into the prom to see Carrie and Tommy together.²⁸ Then the camera rises high above the stage to the rafters where the bucket of blood expectantly awaits, bobbing as if in anticipation; and from *the blood's point of view*, we see from this aerial distance Carrie and Tommy declared

prom king and queen. We then cut to Carrie and Tommy making their way toward the stage, which De Palma films in languorous slow motion; bathed in blue light, Carrie and Tommy are idealized figures of romance, making their way to institutionalized status as the couple that embodies normativity on the stage and as the couple that destroys as it is destroyed.

For some critics, such as the influential Pauline Kael, De Palma slows down all the action at this point because of his sadistic glee, extending the unbearable suspense.²⁹ But such a reading misses the crucial quality of De Palma's ambivalence toward the entire proceedings—the pageant that signifies normativity; the heterosexual couple as the seal of the social order; the enforced, compulsory nature of institutionalized social rituals like the prom—and his utterly split allegiances between seeing Carrie happy and seeing her wrath, the rapturous joy of Carrie's romantic aspirations and the world-shattering mayhem of her rage, and the competing author figures. And, of course, De Palma's identification extends to wanting to see Carrie shamed so that he can share in it; his identification with her, engineered to be our own as well, means that he must experience her shame so he can unleash her anger.

For the simultaneous high points of Miss Collins's removal of Sue Snell, who can stop Chris's plot, and Chris's pulling of the rope just as Carrie experiences the full height of her joy—and her Christ-like forgiving of her oppressors, as she mouths, through tears, "Thank you"—De Palma designs a brilliant montage sequence, still in the slow-motion mode, in which Chris's successful pulling of the rope results in a kind of cinematic orgasm, heightened by the spatialized shots of Chris licking her lips, of her eye, and of her bared teeth. De Palma expresses his own wresting of narrative control *away from Carrie* through these spatialized shots of a woman's body, part-objects he wishes to reverence and destroy, to evoke the theories of Melanie Klein. Chris's isolated eye, in particular, links her to Carrie as a fellow author figure, whose killing eye will foment and foil narrative.

In another extraordinary failed *pietà*, De Palma exudes his ambivalence toward the heterosexual master narrative represented by the ritual of the prom. When the bucket of blood releases its contents on Carrie, Tommy angrily (though, for us, silently) screams at the crowd, reaching out to comfort Carrie. But then the bucket itself falls on Tommy's head, probably killing him on the spot. He becomes the decapitated, castrated male to Carrie's shamed, seemingly castrated woman. As he reaches out to Carrie, he slides over her body. What she offers in response is a gesture that is highly ambiguous in manner: Carrie either reaches out to him or repulses his body from her own. Either she mourns him or casts him out of her hell paradise.

When Carrie is drenched with blood, De Palma drowns out almost every sound other than those in Carrie's psychic life, the dripping of blood and the

swinging of the bucket. What De Palma creates here as well in the film's diegetic sound world is a kind of *split soundscape*, which transforms into a split between the muted diegetic world and Carrie's interiority. De Palma makes inaudible the "real" action of events, splitting its sounds off from those in Carrie's head, producing odd effects such as P. J. Soles's riotously cruel, guffawing, yet *silent* laughter. As she subjectively hears every member of the crowd, including Miss Collins, laughing at her, as well as her mother's thickly exaggerated voice, remnants of the conversation they had before Carrie left for the prom ("They're all going to laugh at you"), Carrie also sees the crowd spinning in vertiginous circles, laughing, taunting. On a formal level, these kaleidoscopic shots tear apart and reassemble the image, anticipating the imminent use of split screen.

While it is clear that only a few members of the audience are actually laughing, at least at this point—and indeed that many are horrified and angry, ashamed for Carrie—what matters to De Palma and to us is that Carrie feels an unbearable assault of derisive looks and laughter, a kind of miasmic entombment in shame. When she *rises up from herself*, looking like a fetus covered in blood but with eternal, knowing, blinding eyes, she comes into her own as a powerful author figure whose eyes transform, reshape, and kill, the mirror and the match of De Palma's camera. (Here De Palma's film bears a certain similarity to David Cronenberg's film about the birth of female rage, *The Brood* [1979], which may have been influenced by De Palma.) Here is the supreme moment of transformation in the woman's film, reborn as the pinnacle of modern horror, Carrie's transformation from Cinderella to Fury. De Palma's defense against Carrie's gaze, the split-screen technique allows him competitively both to control and to manage Carrie's vision, yet it also extends the reach and the range of her gaze.

In the first split-screen image, which signals the onslaught of her wrath, we see a close-up of Carrie's face on the right of the screen as she telekinetically sets the stage—creates the scene—of her prom-destruction narrative; in the shifting images in opposition to her face, we see the back door close behind Chris and Billy as they leave the gym; the gym's front doors closing; the lights turning red. (And it is clear in these shots—which do not appear as if they are from Carrie's subjective view but are, instead, counterbalanced *against* her viewing, many of the prom goers *are* indeed laughing, so—did they all really laugh at her? What did Carrie hear? What did she see? We will never know.) If Marnie saw red and then experienced trauma, Carrie turns her trauma *into* the color red, reappropriating the color of condemnation as her own palette of agency, much as his Puritan heroine Hester Prynne does in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*. Moreover, De Palma takes his intertextual *agon* with Hitchcock to a deeper, auditory level here (not for the first time in the film): Carrie's telekinetic "flexing" is signaled by the

sounds of shrieking violins, a quote from Bernard Herrmann's peerless score for *Psycho*. In Herrmann's score, the violins symbolize the sounds of Norman Bates's annihilating knife during the shower-murder scene; but in De Palma, the effect is more various—the violins intertextually link Carrie to the equally mother-dominated Norman Bates, but they also signify, among other things, the force of De Palma's editorial control, slicing through film to create singular images, and the fulfillment of Carrie's promise of power.³⁰ Pino Donaggio's Herrmannesque score further deepens the intertextual levels throughout, a score split between homage and self-conscious mockery.

In an extraordinary effect, the image of Carrie's face in one panel sinisterly passes across the screen itself, moving to the left. This maneuver firmly establishes the film at this point as a *text*, a narrative that Carrie's authority grabs hold of, turns back to the beginning (the movement resembles a typewriter or keyboard cursor being moved to the starting position of the line), begins afresh. We can say, as well, that here De Palma not only acknowledges but also wrests himself free of the influence of King's novel and of the struggle between literary and cinematic modes of telling a story; the moving panel of Carrie's flexing face gestures toward literary production but more dramatically, as an effect only possible through the split screen, announces the potentialities of the cinematic, the image as endlessly mutable.

We then get a remarkable split-screen image, one panel of which is a close-up of Carrie's face and the other of which is a medium shot of *Carrie looking down at herself*, engulfed in red blood and red light. The effect of this split image is to make it appear that Carrie stares, bewildered and awed, at her own image, a sight of wonder and horror, the ultimate representation of the split subject. Even more boldly, I would argue, than Hitchcock, De Palma fuses expressionism with surrealism, as this distorted, impossible, self-reflective image emblemizes. It also begins to suggest that the blood itself—this chthonic, ancient symbol of the body and of femininity—*transforms Carrie*, who stares in wonderment at what the blood has wrought. The image again dramatizes De Palma's split identification between Carrie and his cinema, empathy and horror, revelry and revulsion.

As the melee of destruction ensues, a deep, infernal red suffuses the entire gymscape, as the promgoers, those who laughed and those who wept, all succumb to Carrie's killing gaze. De Palma would appear to pay homage to Edgar Allan Poe's great short story "The Masque of the Red Death," creating a pageant of revelers attempting to elude "the horror and the redness of blood." De Palma's films, as Terence Rafferty has argued, are best understood in the context of the collage.³¹ The shots of the fire hose swelling and surging with water, moving out of its casing, and pulverizing the promgoers with its forceful blast, all organically correspond—formally as well as thematically—to the previous

images in the film of Carrie in the shower, the water imagery and the phallic might of the showerhead. The snaky, slithering hose suggests Medusa's snaky locks, just as the phallic nozzle spewing liquid suggests male sexuality. One split image counterbalances the phallic, spewing hose on the left with Carrie's left-angled gaze on the right, associating her eyes with phallic, penetrative force. To use Thomas Doherty's phrase, these images connote the *abstract genital*, fusing tropes of gendered power, as does the Medusa myth itself.³²

In Freud's view, Medusa's Head signifies "the terrifying genitals of the mother"; males attempt to defend against this terror through the display of their "erect penis," an apotropaic effect that attempts to "intimidate the Evil Spirit" to whom it says, "I am not afraid of you. I defy you. I have a penis."³³ Revealing the hilarious inadequacy of this defense, Carrie dispatches the flimsy figures of male power with her phallic eyes. The male conspirators get caught in the gym doors that Carrie makes a maw; the anxious principal who couldn't get Carrie's name right and the ugly, bespectacled, pettily cruel English teacher are respectively electrocuted and burned to death; a male student who tries to arrest the wildly spraying hose only manages to direct its spray toward the electric lights, shattering them and disrupting the hold of red, which Carrie then *reestablishes* through the flames that loom behind her and then adorn her descent from the stage and her eerie, godlike procession out of the gym.

In one of the most provocative and unsettling images, De Palma creates a surprising juxtaposition between two heretofore oppositional characters. On the right side of the screen, we watch Chris and Billy watching the destruction; on the other side, we see Miss Collins, isolated from the group trying to aid the probably already dead Tommy Ross, thrown against the wall. The right side close-up of Chris's face watching the mayhem in horror matches up against Miss Collins crying, "Carrie, Carrie!" with her arms outstretched, then her hands covering her face; we then cut to paired-split images of Carrie's telekinetic gaze and the basketball hoop backboard (in a grotesque parody of her gym-teacher role) violently wrenching loose and cutting Miss Collins's body in two. De Palma then creates the stunning split image of Chris, her eyes popping in horror, watching on one side as Miss Collins writhes in her death agonies on the other. The maternal themes of the film deepen the horror of this image; Miss Collins looks like a woman in the throes of a fatal childbirth or a woman fatally barred from embracing her daughter, another failed *pietà*. The last split-screen image shows us Miss Collins crumpled in death on the left, Carrie, bloody and erect on the stage. The failed mother sinks into oblivion as the avenging daughter rises in apocalyptic triumph, a harbinger of the second climax of the film, in which Carrie and her mother have their final confrontation. Chris and Billy duck from their high vantage point lest Carrie see them and destroy them with her Medusan look.

Though it takes place outside the gym, Carrie's destruction of Chris and Billy in their car provides the fitting conclusion to this entire sequence. As a red fire truck heads for the gym, we see Carrie, a small, lonely, terrifying figure in red walking slowly toward us. Chris and Billy, Chris driving, speed toward Carrie in their red car. *Red, red, red*—the blood splatters across the whole world. Chris can barely contain her intent desire to run Carrie over. Almost at the point where Chris will run her over, Carrie turns around, stares them in the face, and then, with her flexing eyes, flips the car over, and then, with her *eye*, explodes the car. In a galvanizing effect, De Palma uses rapid-fire surgical editing to give us the impression that we are zeroing in on Carrie's eye and then that it outwardly projects the force of destruction. For Eyal Peretz, De Palma is the "greatest contemporary investigator, at least in American cinema, of the nature and the logic of the cinematic image," which Peretz, following Lacan, describes as a "blankness at the heart of the senses."³⁴ While the first part of Peretz's argument seems undeniably true, I'm not so sure if De Palma is equally convinced about the blankness of the senses. If anything, in *Carrie*, he seems to suggest that looks can truly kill, that vision has the power to extend the force of the mind. De Palma's corporeal cinema defies the bodilessness, the affectlessness, of Lacanian theory (which is why De Palma reanimates Freud's body-bound thinking). If, in *Psycho*, Marion Crane's dead eye, staring lifelessly out at us, projects the image of the death of the heroine at the hands of male power, Carrie's eye outwardly, actively, phallically wields the power of death over life.

The Mother's Phallus: The Final Embrace

The living Mrs. White replaces the dead mother of *Psycho*. Like Mrs. Bates—at least, insofar as Norman impersonates her—Mrs. White both phobically fulminates against sex and displays ravenous interest in it. In the second—and truer—climax of the film, Mrs. White confronts her daughter with the full force of her tormented relationship to sexuality; in a long, desperate, sad, frightening monologue, she explains to Carrie that her sin lies in having experienced pleasure in her sexual relations with her husband: "I liked it," she moans, "*I liked it.*" Mrs. White indexes the entire history of religious intolerance over sexuality and the eroticization of this intolerance; reliving her own sexual past, Mrs. White reveals herself not as the film's maternal superego but as its obscene mother, the mother who makes her own sexuality a spectacle for the child.³⁵

But through the oddly angled focus at which we see Mrs. White kneeling before her daughter, she is also a child begging *her* mother for absolution. At the heart of this scene lies the unspeakable sorrow of an infinite divide between mother and daughter—each inconsolable and unable to console the other. In the most heartbreaking staging of the failed *pietà* in the film, Carrie finally has her

mother's arms around her, pressed against her body, wanting her mother's love, love that Mrs. White seems finally on the verge of freely giving. And then Mrs. White picks up an enormous, gleaming, phallic knife and plunges it into Carrie's body. The promise of absolution and shared loves transmutes into the fatal severing of the mother-daughter bond. Playing with the tropes of obscenity he associates with her fundamentalism and self-loathing, De Palma films Mrs. White from a low angle, from Carrie's perspective as she struggles, on the floor, to escape her mother. Mrs. White holds the knife, uses it to sign the cross, all with a mad smile of unspeakably delicious delight. This is De Palma at his most Buñuelian: the entire sequence recalls the mother-meat dream in *Los Olvidados* (1950).

The mother who has absorbed the most woman-hating messages of patriarchy now wields a symbol that embodies its most murderous logic—phallogocentric power in the hands of a misogynistic, mad, self-hating, obscenely pleased woman. This symbol represents not only a fetishistic overcompensation but also a phallicization of the traditional tools of the domestic angel, as the earlier overhead shot of Mrs. White ominously chopping vegetables with this knife suggested. Overturning and revising the Medea myth in which the mother kills her children, Carrie saves herself by telekinetically wielding the same domestic-phallic instruments of death and sending them hurtling into the mother's body, using the same phallic weaponry the mother wields, but to the *nth* power. But so profoundly has the mother identified with the patriarchal logic that condemns her, when the domestic implements—a grater, other kinds of knives—impale her, she releases the fullest expression of orgasmic joy in the film, a kind of keening cry of final erotic fulfillment that satirizes as it surpasses all the attempts at various kinds of satisfaction, pleasure, and fulfillment on the part of the other characters in the film. She mockingly transforms the mother's cry of anguish in childbirth into the orgasmic cries of pleasure in death as the child she birthed kills *her*.

When she dies, impaled, with a smile on her face, this blasphemous image associates her with the similarly impaled statue, oddly present in Carrie's closet, of the Catholic martyr (and homoerotic icon) Saint Sebastian, who has arrows sticking out of his body. Though De Palma certainly exudes a kind of satirical glee at this climactic religious parody, that is far from its only register. Few moments in the history of the cinema are more devastating than Carrie's anguished cry of loss when she contemplates her mother's lifeless body, hugging her to her own as the house itself begins to shatter and finally implode. As has occurred throughout the film, satire cedes to sorrow, one so deep that the world has to end.

The Fatal Embrace

Carrie is famed for its *Deliverance*-style denouement. In a dream sequence, Sue Snell, holding flowers like the maiden Persephone, walks toward Carrie's grave. As Sue deposits the flowers on the rubble-strewn, scorched-earth grave—from which a makeshift cross with the words "Carrie White Burns in Hell" scrawled on it obscenely juts—Carrie's blood-drenched hand pops out and grabs Sue's own, Sue (and the audience) screaming in response.

This is not, however, the final image of the film. The final image is of Sue Snell in her mother's arms as Sue screams during her nightmare, caught between two worlds, that of her mother comforting her and the nightmare world of Carrie's inescapable grasp. As she holds her daughter, Mrs. Snell repeats, "It's all right, I'm here, I'm here." This frenzied image recalls the image of Margaret White holding her daughter and then stabbing her, and the other failed embraces in the film. Nevertheless, this final mother-daughter embrace constitutes the closest approximation of a truly loving connection in the film. Enhancing this sense, De Palma cast Priscilla Pointer, Amy Irving's real-life mother, in the role of Sue Snell's mother. The bleak and horrifying *Carrie*, with its untenable mother-daughter bond and theme of the failed embrace, ends dramatically with an image of a mother and daughter, whatever gulf separates them, in each other's arms—itsself, of course, another resolutely split image, agonizingly poised between life and death.

Margaret White chooses death as compensation for the traumatic loss of her daughter. Her attempt to kill Carrie is also an attempt to kill herself, one that spectacularly succeeds: well aware of Carrie's power, her mother must know that any attempt to harm her may have fatal consequences. Attempting to control Carrie, Mrs. White emerges as perhaps the author figure with whom De Palma most closely identifies. Attempting to control and finally sever herself from Carrie; terrorized by but captivated by sex; registering the violence enacted against women yet acting violently toward a woman, Mrs. White allegorizes De Palma's own conflictual directorial project.

But De Palma identifies with almost all the women in this film, with, I believe, the exception of Miss Collins. The only woman with actual, autocratic power in the film, she is also the film's chief hypocrite, the one who tells Tommy Ross that he will look ridiculous if he takes Carrie to the prom. It is the figure of the hypocrite whom De Palma cannot abide and the figure of the hypocrite who endures the most savage retribution.

What has been overlooked in most studies of De Palma is his investment in women. This investment is an ambivalent, fraught one, but it *is* an investment. Caught up in their fates, De Palma joins in with his female characters in their daring, dangerous battle against patriarchy, even if De Palma also constructs the

narratives in which these battles are waged from a position of patriarchal power. I believe De Palma's interest in femininity stems from his prevailing interest in issues of intimacy and betrayal; women become important to De Palma, then, from an essentialist understanding of women as the more affectionally motivated of the sexes and therefore the most vivid embodiment of issues involving interpersonal ties. Without exculpating De Palma for this essentialism, I argue that women are crucial to his cinema not just for issues of misogyny and violence but in order to understand the nature of cinematic representations of emotional and psychic experiences and processes, especially in terms of individual directorial obsessions.

De Palma shares the conflicted response to intimacy of Tommo, Herman Melville's narrator in his first novel, *Typee*. Observing the Marquesan islanders' interactions with their colonial oppressors, Tommo remarks, "Fatal embrace! They fold to their bosom the vipers whose sting is destined to poison all their joys; and the instinctive feeling of love within their breast is soon converted into the bitterest hate."³⁶ In the end, the failed *pietà* of Carrie and other De Palma films represents the welter of warring emotions, the emotional and psychic needs and demands in his works. It represents the desperate need for connection and closure and the horror of intimacy and its threat of engulfment. It registers the potential for not only love and recognition but also suffering and violation, the piercing stab of betrayal within their very heart of the bonds of love and tenderness. The relentless splitting of his cinema attests to a despairing belief that all bonds will be severed, all intimacies shattered. De Palma's roaming identificatory relationships with the various women author figures in this film and others is, finally, a desperate display of longing and loss, a search for one character who will return his embrace.

CHAPTER 4

Demeter and Persephone in Space

Transformation, Femininity, and Myth in the *Alien* Films

Directed by Ridley Scott, the first *Alien* film (1979) is not about the heroine's transformation but rather her revelation, as we discover that she is the most resourceful or, at the very least, the luckiest, member of the motley outer-space mining crew who will all be killed by the titular monster, save for her. The endless transformation of the heroine, Lieutenant Ellen Ripley (indelibly played by Sigourney Weaver), however, is the signal concern of the *Alien* film series as a whole, a feat that takes place over the course of the four films in which she appears: the first; *Aliens* (1986, directed by James Cameron); *Alien 3* (1992, directed by David Fincher); and the fourth, *Alien Resurrection* (1997, directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet).

This quartet of films presents, with acute responsiveness to the concerns of the period from which each film emerges, the ongoing transformation of the heroine who unites them all. Ripley transforms from a loyal, tough-minded officer who goes by the book but then makes up her own ingenious rules (*Alien*) to a Reaganite hardbody (*Aliens*) to a shaven-headed allegorical AIDS warrior (*Alien 3*) to a posthuman fusion of woman and the very creature she has battled for two decades of Hollywood filmmaking and illimitable diegetic centuries (*Alien Resurrection*).

Despite its sci-fi-horror trappings, the *Alien* films are a postmodern collage of the themes of the classical Hollywood woman's film, the genre in a denatured, reimagined and, to evoke Robert B. Ray's theory of the western, concealed form.¹ As Robert Lang writes in his study *American Film Melodrama*, "The melodrama is . . . first a drama of identity. A woman (or a woman's point of view) dominates the narrative of the family melodrama

because individual identity within the patriarchal context—always defined by a masculine standard—is problematic for women . . . The family melodrama is a genre that addresses this problem. In the family melodrama the villain changes over time, but in one way or another the villain is some aspect of the patriarchy.”² Certainly, the *Alien* films concern themselves with an ever-evolving feminine subjectivity. Moreover, they are concerned with femininity’s uncomfortable place within patriarchy. But the villain in the films is not always clearly an outgrowth of patriarchy; rather, the very nature of villainy in the films is part of the complex questions they raise about identity and desire.

The Return to Melodrama

As a heroine, Ripley liminally recalls the heroines of the classical Hollywood woman’s film as she anticipates a new form of cinematic womanhood. As I have suggested more than once already in this study, one way of understanding the *Alien* films is to interpret them as “concealed” versions of the woman’s film. They are also a spectacular return to melodrama. As Peter Brooks writes of melodrama, “The desire to express all seems a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode. Nothing is spared because nothing is left unsaid; the characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings . . . They assume primary psychic roles, father, mother, child, and express basic psychic conditions.” Classic melodrama, he writes, opens with the presentation of virtue and innocence, introduces “menace or evil, which places virtue in a situation of extreme peril,” and moves to a third act that is a “panoply of violent action which offers a highly physical ‘acting out’ of virtue’s liberation from the oppressive efforts of evil.” “Virtue,” Brooks writes, “is almost inevitably represented by a young heroine.”³ Heroines like Ripley and, later, Clarice Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs* represent melodramatic virtue in its modern-feminist, modern-horror contexts. Certainly, the schema Brooks describes is thoroughly applicable to the narrative design of the first *Alien* film as well as to *The Silence of the Lambs*: the pure heroine confronts a world of evil from which she, in a feminist twist, extricates *herself* by the end.

The *Alien* films fuse melodrama with other genres, the thriller and the horror film.⁴ Beneath their grisly generic surfaces, the *Alien* films are most resonantly woman’s films that recall their exemplary versions in the classical Hollywood era: *Alice Adams* (1935), *Now, Voyager* (1942), *The Heiress* (1949). In these films, the heroine is an independent, idiosyncratic, isolate woman who struggles with questions of desire and the normative trajectory of gendered identity.⁵ Like the respective heroines of these films, Alice Adams, Charlotte Vale, and Catherine Sloper, Ripley must struggle with her destiny: will she lose her idiosyncratic agency to what Carolyn Heilbrun has called the “romance plot”—marriage and

family—or will she retain it, at the cost of a socially unacceptable isolate existence? For Heilbrun, men's and women's fictions can be distinguished by the "quest" narrative that drives the former and the "romance plot" that drives the latter.⁶ I will refine Heilbrun slightly for our purposes and call this the marriage plot. By the end of the series, Ripley's intransigent refusal of the marriage plot has taken her so far outside its confines that she is no longer even human.

If the conventional marriage plot of the woman's film pitted the singular heroine against the nearly inescapable threat of compulsory heterosexuality and institutionalized marriage, the *Alien* films devise a shifting, ornate plot of their own that finds ever more baroque ways to bar its heroine from entrance into the marriage plot.⁷ Ripley is far too busy battling Aliens to sustain a relationship that would lead to marriage. While she certainly does seem to flirt with desire in the films, even having sex with a man as scarred by the past as she in *Alien 3*, her chief, all-consuming erotic and intellectual aim is vanquishing the inexhaustible Alien menace. The Alien, then, emerges as a tripartite parody of the woman's film suitor, particularly in his foreign cast, courtship, and the threat of marriage.⁸ Forever hoping to woo its intransigent quarry, the Alien wants nothing more than to possess Ripley and force her to bear its young. The Alien, to be sure, does not discriminate on the basis of sex or age or species when it comes to procreation, unhesitatingly availing itself of male, female, child, and nonhuman host bodies; nevertheless, the films focus on the Alien's rapacious fixation on Ripley as well as the heroine's initially aggrieved and ultimately deeply cathected fixation on it.

As I have been arguing, one of the defining features of the woman's film is the theme of transformation, which happens on both physical and emotional levels. Female transformation functions, in part, as a strategy for the avoidance of male domination and marriage, even as it solicits both. Once made over, Charlotte Vale in *Now, Voyager* finds potential romance but ultimately rejects it; Catherine Sloper in *The Heiress* transforms into a statelier, more confident, and also more formidable version of herself, which leads her to reject her duplicitous former suitor Morris Townsend when he makes an ill-advised return. Transformation in the *Alien* films serves both this purpose and a different one altogether. Ripley's transformations can be read as attempts to outmatch the Aliens in ingenuity and, ultimately, to co-opt their powers as her own, all in an effort to defeat them, however mournfully this defeat comes to be rendered. But ultimately Ripley's transformations are their own end.

Following Raymond Bellour, Slavoj Žižek has argued that removing the titular avian menace from Hitchcock's film *The Birds* (1963) reveals the true themes at work in the film: an oedipal drama that is, Žižek adds, dominated by the maternal superego.⁹ Removing the Alien from the *Alien* films similarly reveals the true drama: the endless permeability and transformability of the heroine.

Seen in this light, the Aliens themselves serve, in their own endless abilities to transform, as a dark, lurid, terrifying allegory of the heroine's own endless metamorphoses. They represent the terror and fascination of female transformation; the heroine, in sustaining audience fascination for over three decades, represents the ongoing cultural fascination with woman's distinctive ability to transform. The four films constitute an extraordinarily rich narrative of femininity—indeed, together they are a female epic in which the heroine comes to know her own capacities, decides to take action in the face of enemy threat, armors herself, faces the enemy, dies to save humanity, and merges with the Alien. This female epic cross-fertilizes the key motifs of classical literature with Christian mythology as well as the Christian Crusades, but, as the merging of enemy species and gendered identities suggests, spawns a mythology altogether its own. Just as *Carrie* fused classical and Christian mythologies, so too do the *Alien* films.

As Barbara Creed has argued, drawing on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection as an experience related to the disavowal of the maternal body, the *Alien* films exemplify the cinematic fear of the archaic mother, the terror of an engulfing return to origins.¹⁰ While I believe Creed persuasively illuminates many aspects of these films, I want to reconsider the question of the terrifying archaic mother by emphasizing the role of the *daughter* in the series, which in turn allows us to reconsider the symbolic maternal presence in them. The myth of Demeter and Persephone illuminates these films, allowing us to perceive what they chiefly foreground: the daughter's simultaneous flight from and desire to *return* to the mother. It is precisely the heroine's desire to return to the mother—rather than her fear that she inevitably will, in a process that will consume her—that Creed overlooks, focusing instead on the ways in which this theme stems from and embodies misogynistic male fears. Further, if we consider the *Alien* films as a postmodern version of the classical Hollywood woman film, and therefore a kind of collage of their themes, the films come to seem like an almost parodistic elaboration of the fears that animate the woman's film as well as a cathartic attempt to work through them.

My focus in this chapter will be on the first two films, which is not to suggest that they are more important than the latter two, but that between them they offer a particularly instructive example of the shifting complexities of the cinematic uses of the myth of Demeter and Persephone. With great relevance for the theme of female transformation, it provides a vital structure for understanding intergenerational bonds between women and the cultural uses made of these bonds. In addition, the myth in its cinematic form illuminates issues about gender and representation generally and queer male sexuality as well.

***Alien*: The Endless Primal Scene**

Yonic symbols—symbols of female sexuality—are so rife in the first film in the series as to take on an obsessive character: the yawning yonic entrances to the alien ship whose distress call the *Nostramo* answers; huge leathery eggs that open up with vaginal lips; the doors of the air shafts, circular and swirling as they open and close shut; the endless series of enclosed spaces on the alien and the Earth ship; even the circular light on Lambert (Veronica Cartwright) when the Alien closes in on her. Birth imagery saturates the film: the crew, in white boxers that look like diapers, awakening from hypersleep in their pods; the scene in which the away team discovers that the huge, long-dead alien pilot (commonly called the Space Jockey by fans), victim of the Alien infestation, had his now fossilized stomach exploded open from within; the limitless expanse of Alien eggs through which the crewmember Kane (John Hurt) tentatively wades; the “face-hugger” Alien that attaches itself to Kane’s face and appears to be nurturing him, a parasite that counterintuitively breeds an unimaginable new life; and, of course, Kane’s infamous childbirth scene, in which the Alien infant, having come to term, rudely and bloodily bursts out of Kane’s stomach, a male birthing scene that has horrifyingly parodistic—and, as I will show, reactionary—implications. Jonesy, the cat, is another kind of parody of the infant, scampering about, looked for like a lost child, held in a crib-cage. And the fully grown Alien itself—however “abstract genital” it is, most clearly typed as a male monster—is a kind of male mother, taking its victims back to its lair, to feed and foster its young.¹¹ The victims are also like the Alien’s children, perversely coddled, wrapped in an obscene embrace. Indeed, in the scene in which Dallas (Tom Skerritt) first attempts to corner and then to escape the Alien in the air shafts, his confrontation with the killer is a kind of grotesque “welcome home” scene, in which the Alien greets its prodigal son with murderously open arms, as it shrieks out in incomprehensible but palpably eager surprise.

Though Sigourney Weaver’s Ripley is initially presented as only one member of the ensemble-cast crew and not the one in charge—she is second in command to Dallas—it is gradually revealed that she is the heroine of the film because of her ability to survive as much as her tough-minded, resilient intelligence. Many critics have remarked on this film’s version of Ripley as the unmarried 1970s career woman. What I suggest about the film is that in every way, through every symbolic and literal means, it is a kind of paranoid allegory of the problems *posed* by the unmarried career woman both to herself and to culture. That it is so brilliantly made and complexly meaningful (it is a film one can watch again and again and still be surprised by) only adds to the power of this allegory and the force of its implications. *Alien* emerged at the end of the 1970s, when feminism’s first wave had already firmly established

itself, made a profound impact on the gendered public sphere, and provoked a concomitant backlash. Unlike what I term the *tragic feminism* propounded in other films as diverse as *Love Story* (1970) and *The Enforcer* (1976), in which unusual, strong-minded women meet their untimely deaths, *Alien* ensures the survival of its fittest, the resourceful, singular woman who makes up her own rules and, most significantly, avoids the trappings of heterosexual romance by seeming indifferent to them. Or, in this case, by being met *with* indifference—if there is a vague suggestion of Ripley's desire for taciturn Dallas, though only a vague one, Dallas's own indifference to her is clearly expressed. In one scene in which, protesting his orders to allow the face-huggered Kane on board the ship, Ripley corners Dallas in a corridor, sealing the door to bar his exit, we expect to see some sort of suggestion of romance or even of a prior romance that has now cooled off and its uncomfortable intersection with company rules and job performance. But no such suggestion is made, except for the subtly pleading look in the otherwise officious Ripley's eyes. Dallas, exasperated and impatient, explains that he wants nothing other than to get off the troublesome planet. The way Ridley Scott shoots the scene, the two are never in the same shot. They never engage in the kind of tortured romantic intimacy that might be expected of characters played by the most attractive stars and the likeliest ones to form an onscreen couple. The film neither satisfies our expectations that they will work out their differences nor establishes that these differences will impede their romantic progress. The film leaves the question of romance a blank. It leaves Ripley alone, with her sense of order, her desire to be heard by Dallas, her confusion. It leaves Dallas quite alone as well.

Indeed, throughout the film, Scott emphasizes a profound sense of disconnection. The long empty corridors of the Company ship the *Nostramo*, animated only by blinking sci-fi lights and alarming warning bells; the almost infinite, primordially ominous expanse of the swampy yet chill planet; the vast stretches of space on board the alien ship; the even more immense, unsurpassable expanse of chthonic space where the eggs lie in wait, covered in a non-lifelike spectral blue mist; the harrowing infinitude of cold, dark, dead space through which the stolid, mottled, uninvitingly Industrial Age ship plods; the isolation of various members of the crew as they hunt for the Alien; Ripley's solitary battle near the end with the Alien on the shuttle, who, unbeknownst to her, had come on board; and Ripley's total isolation, save for Jonesy the cat, as she makes her solitary way, a new Eve but without an Adam, to an uncertain destination after annihilating the Alien at last.

Even more freighted than its engagement with 1970s feminism is the movie's *agon*, or conflict, with the classical Hollywood woman's film, the template for this film's retooled narrative, cross-fertilized with the horror and sci-fi genres, of a woman's development. In the woman's film, the heroine's isolation is

juxtaposed against the busy network of those who conform to the social order, who either attempt to banish the heroine from their ranks or attempt to integrate her into them. In *Alice Adams*, the posh members of the upper-class social world into which Katharine Hepburn's idiosyncratic titular heroine is barred entrance quite merrily go about their elitist business despite her attempts to join them; there is no sense that, in her singular display of eccentric selfhood, she has made any kind of impact on them, only on her sympathetic suitor (Fred MacMurray). He rejects her once he discovers her actual lower-class status. (In a studio-imposed, aching false, "happy" ending, he returns to her with a declaration of love, but the sting of rejection endures unabated.) In *Now, Voyager*, various family members either shame Bette Davis's lonely spinster Charlotte Vale into social submission or attempt to effect her rescue, as is also the case with the victimized, "unmarriageable" Catherine Sloper in *The Heiress*.

In Hitchcock's *Marnie* (1964), the central drama is the heroine's intransigent refusal of the social order—embodied chiefly by compulsory heterosexuality and marriage, forces of sexual normativity embodied by Sean Connery's Mark Rutland, a wealthy man from an elite family. Marnie steals money from her employers, changing her identity for each new job. Rutland fancies himself an armchair psychologist-zoologist of the criminal female, and puts Marnie under his own ill-informed analytical care. Though Marnie attempts to reject the strictures of the social order, embodied by marriage, Mark forces her to marry him, threatening to expose her criminal activities if she refuses. She capitulates to marriage but refuses to submit to sex with Mark. After initially agreeing to this arrangement, he finally loses his patience and forces her to have sex with him during their cruise-ship honeymoon. The film offers one of the sharpest feminist critiques of classical Hollywood. Marnie may defy the social order, but her defiance in no way ruptures or stalls it. And by the end, she seems on her way to adopting the strictures of the social order herself. The film makes the cost of all of this piercingly clear, however: when Marnie acquiesces, finally, it is in exhausted defeat: "I don't want to go to prison, Mark—I'd rather stay with you."

Alien's radical contribution to these established woman's film patterns is its suggestion that the woman's intransigent refusal of the marriage plot not only *does* have an impact on the social order but also has profound consequences for it; the social order cannot function without her acquiescence to it. Ripley's general lack of interest, despite some vague suggestions here and there, in heterosexual romance; the ways she eschews conventional femininity—refusing to allow the grievously injured Kane on board, her lack of connection to the only other female crew member, Lambert, who physically and verbally rails against her when she decides not to admit the stricken Kane into the ship—all take an obvious toll on this shipboard world, an extension of the patriarchal world

order of the sinister corporation Weyland-Yutani, often referred to as the Company. The entire film, then, functions as a metaphor for Ripley's lack of conventional womanly virtues and her indifference to the marriage plot. To be sure, it would appear that the tremendous, decades-spanning appeal the heroine has had must, to some degree, lie in these deviations from conventional femininity on the part of the epic's heroine. Yet *Alien* is a vast contraption for the exposure of the disastrous effects of lawless, unlicensed femininity. Everything in the film metaphorically relates to gender-renegade Ripley's problematic femininity, albeit in an ironic, parodistic relation. And in this regard, not only the heroine's uneasy relationship to heterosexuality but also and perhaps most importantly to the maternal is crucial.

If considered as an allegory of the singular woman and her threat, the film offers a dazzling array of symbols, themes, characters, and obsessions that deepen its allegorical work. The birth imagery and the yonic symbols put into play obvious associations of femininity with the maternal and with passive or, in this case, ominous (potentially engulfing, devouring) vaginal sexuality. The eggs, in particular, both in their limitless number and in the diminutive yet deadly phallic threat they contain, connote female sexuality and life-giving power as disturbing and menacing, synonymous with violation and death. The eggs, independent of the female body and autonomous, abstract the idea of female reproductivity, serving as an allegory for the uniquely female ability to bear children that stands in sharp contrast to the heroine's decidedly nonmaternal stance for much of the film. (It is only later that she is more typically typed as maternal in her worried search for and tender embraces of Jonesy.) Kane's monstrous birthing of the Alien is the screen's most emphatic, violent parody of female birth; to lift from Virginia Woolf, "It [is] birth the wrong way round—a monstrous inversion."¹² The implication—again, a parodistic one—is that with women refusing to bear children, men must now take up this burden, against their will and with horrific results, spawning murderous monsters.

While there are many different thematic levels for interpretive engagement with the android-cyborg figure—here called a robot—the science officer, Ash (Ian Holm), his robot identity unbeknownst to the crew for most of the film, provides another and the most perverse allegorical parody of motherhood and of Ripley's nonmother role. When Parker (the great Yaphet Kotto) and Lambert come to Ripley's aid as Ash, exposed as a traitor to the crew (a typical movie role, usually played by a foreigner, here by English actor Ian Holm), wildly attacks Ripley, Parker ends up clobbering Ash in the head, which flies off, revealing his robot identity. As jets of viscous white fluid shoot out of his orifice-neck, drenching the other crew members, and his body twitches and flails uncontrollably, his spasmodic bodily movements exactly double Kane's in death, as if Ash himself were delivering another Alien offspring. The robot mimes the mother

in childbirth and the lactating mother at once. In another of the film's characteristic collapses of gendered referents, the streaming milky fluid suggests both milk and semen, mother and masculinity, in a grotesquely denatured manner that sends up both identity categories. Decapitated, Ash now stands in for the woman's subject position in culture as Hélène Cixous formulated it, symbolically decapitated, denied mind and voice.¹³ Prostrate, his innards being manipulated so that he can be reactivated ("Maybe he knows how to kill it," Ripley instructs), Ash is the corpse-as-mother's-body in a way that corresponds to the Kristevan theory of abjection redeployed in Barbara Creed's work. In the form of Ash, the materiality of the mother's body, rendered starkly visible through hideous dismemberment, provides a sharp contrast to the physical integrity of the human beings who gaze at it.¹⁴ Ash's revealed organs most closely resemble ovaries, and the shots of them being examined by the crew recall medical diagrams of women's bodies and the awestruck "science of woman" of Victorian gynecology. In Ash, the film collapses the bodily identities of the sinister foreign male, the cyborg Other, and the woman-mother, all in a parodistic manner.

Ash is a type of the "effete Englishman" in American culture. The satirical regard for the figure, generally an implicit one in popular culture, has been increasingly visible in the past two decades: witness the backlash against Patrick Stewart's Jean-Luc Picard as tea-drinking, effete Brit who doesn't go on away missions, as opposed to the apparently more masculine and decidedly American *Star Trek* captain, William Shatner's James T. Kirk; the aged English queens played by Brit stalwarts such as Ian McKellen (*Gods and Monsters*, 1998) and Nigel Hawthorne (*The Object of My Affections*, 1991); Giles and especially Wesley from *Buffy* fame; the evil emperor, played by Scottish actor Ian McDiarmid as a sniveling, effeminate, decidedly English villain in the *Star Wars* films, especially the most recent, who corrupts the young and beautiful Anakin Skywalker, leading to his transformation into the dread Darth Vader; and the horde of English invaders, the butt of endless jokes, who take over the ad agency Sterling-Cooper in the third season of the AMC series *Mad Men*.

Ripley's increasingly heated opposition to and increasingly violent conflict with the English Ash have suggestive implications not only for this film but for the others that follow.¹⁵ English and European masculinities in America have historically been associated with European "decadence," artificiality, and effeminacy, in contrast to the sturdy, manly "authenticity" of American manhood.¹⁶ Though only intelligible within an American context, the construction of English-European manhood as both effeminate and artificial finds a significant embodiment in Ash. Associated with the technology of the ship and revealed as an android, Ash is an artificial being, not "authentic." Though what has been called "effeminophobia" cannot be equated, exactly, with homophobia, the opprobrium incurred by those who falter in their performance of gender

identity is certainly linked to homophobia.¹⁷ In homophobic terms, of course, Ash's secretiveness and spying also suggest a sinister queerness and closeted, clandestine behaviors. Moreover, his close relationship to Mother, the onboard computer, connects him with cinematic images, like those in classical psychoanalysis, of the homosexual male who is too closely linked to his mother, *Psycho's* Norman Bates being an obvious example.

Readings of the cyborg as a metaphor for queer sexuality deepen as they intersect with queer-British-male typing.¹⁸ Ripley's confrontation with Ash—a nonnormative male figure whose queer sexuality is overdetermined by his associations with Englishness, foreignness, blended genital markers, and his cyborg identity—prefigures her climactic confrontation with the gender-bending figure of the “Newborn” in the final Ripley film, *Alien Resurrection*, a hybrid human-alien monster typed as male yet who has breasts and other physical indicators of the feminine gender. (I discuss this fourth *Alien* film and the sexual implications of Ripley's battle with the Newborn in the next chapter.) Indeed, in all of these regards, Ash doubles Kane and vice versa, reinforcing the complex threats emanating from and directed at each character.

Kane is no less a problematic figure than Ash in the suggestive queer resonances of his characterization. As Robin Wood, who viewed *Alien* as one of the chief examples of a slew of reactionary horror films of its era, wrote, “The sexuality so rigorously repressed in the film returns . . . in its monster . . . At first associated with femaleness (it begins as an egg in a vast womb), it attaches itself to the most ‘feminine’ of the crew’s males (John Hurt, most famous for his portrayal of Quentin Crisp) and enters him through the mouth as a preliminary to being ‘born’ out of his stomach . . . As a composite image of archetypal sexual dreads it could scarcely be bettered: the monstrous phallus combined with the *vagina dentata*.”¹⁹

Numerous points are worth mentioning here. At this stage in an iconic film's history, rereleased theatrically in 2003 in a new director's cut, the subsequent roles the actors play add to and deepen connections current audiences make between the actors and what their screen presence signifies. Hurt starred as gay icon Quentin Crisp in the 1975 *The Naked Civil Servant* television film and played the sexually and morally depraved Caligula in the 1976 miniseries *I, Claudius*. His subsequent roles in such films as *Partners* (1982, in which he played a gay cop partnered with a straight man) and *Love and Death on Long Island* (1997, in which his character is in love with a young actor played by Jason Priestley) enhance his profile as a queer screen presence, in phobic and progressive ways at once. The “English” figures of Kane and Ash both reinforce and double the threatening queer and foreign presence of the Alien, while also, especially in Kane's case but also in the physically mutilated

Ash's, suggesting a somatic and emotional vulnerability unusual for American cinematic males generally.

The endless doubling and refraction of the film extends to each of the characters, all of whom embody or give vent to some gathering, indefinable, yet palpable frustration with Ripley's enigmatic sexuality. Ripley herself, as Sigourney Weaver so tautly and thoughtfully plays her in the most sustained female performance in film, blends the masculine and the feminine, especially here, in which she is as mannish in manner as she is, at key points, conventionally feminine. Dallas, while in the traditional leading-man role, is pointedly indifferent to her sexual charms; Kane and Ash are too preoccupied with their discrete fixations on the Alien to pay her much mind; evoking the famous Fiedlerian view of a mythic male bonding that allows males to escape "the gentle tyranny of home and woman," Parker and Brett (Harry Dean Stanton), in their jokey bond and cheerfully derisive manner toward Ripley, together embody the homosocial of American culture, male bonds that eschew women.²⁰ (Parker does get in a wry joke about cunnilingus at the dinner table scene right before Kane gives birth to the Alien, but, pointedly, it is Lambert who gets the joke, registering simultaneous offense and amusement at it.)

Lambert is Ripley's double through negation: whereas Ripley, for the most part, maintains a cool lockdown on her emotions (though one increasingly thawed by the ever-more-heated course of events), Lambert, in Veronica Cartwright's extraordinarily vivid performance, emotes prodigiously, pouring out torrents of tears, finally moaning with an infant piteousness. She ironizes Ripley's stalwart toughness through these spectacular emotional pyrotechnics, challenging and undermining Ripley's resolve. Moreover, as noted, Lambert directly retaliates against Ripley in a scene restored to the film in the director's cut, in which she yells at and strikes Ripley for having refused to let the away team back into the ship once Kane has been incapacitated by the parasite. Still, it is the male characters, not Lambert, that cause Ripley to lose her cool. After Dallas has been killed and Ripley, Lambert, Parker, and Ash have a tense powwow to determine their next course of action, Ripley, now in command, is noticeably contained and rationalistic as she refutes Lambert's hysterical and angry pleas to blow up the ship (which Ripley will eventually do). It is when Parker appears to be defying her orders that she blows her stack, and it is when Ash exasperatingly announces that he is still "collating" a response to the Alien threat that she appears to be momentarily at an appalled loss for words. But she quickly regains her composure, telling Ash, "Just keep doing what you have been doing—nothing." With all of these characters holding Ripley's in counterbalance, each suggests some kind of tension in her psyche or some aspect of her presence that provokes the film's own anxieties, responses transmuted into disturbing cinematic stylistics.

This film's complex engagements with anxieties over gendered, sexual, and racial identity would appear to be synthesized within the controlling metaphor of the Alien. The Alien has been, throughout the years, interpreted in numerous ways as the central metaphorical monster of the films. But I would argue that the Alien is the showier, more attention-getting of *two* monsters diegetically present in *Alien*, the other being "Mother," the onboard ship computer. While mother issues are symbolically conveyed by its elaborate aesthetic design, the film also makes Mother into an onscreen presence, albeit in an abstracted form. In her confrontation with Mother, one that parallels that with the Alien, Ripley emerges as the ambivalent daughter whose love-hate ambivalence deepens into pure, unadulterated hate. In this regard, she is a hostile Persephone to a chilly Demeter who maintains an attitude of clinical indifference to her daughter's plight.

In the Greek myth, vernal earth goddess Demeter casts the world into a wintry despair that symbolizes her grief over the abduction of her daughter; in *Alien*, the symbolic mother exhibits an attitude of stone-cold detachment from her daughter's fate. Recalling that Freud theorized, in his 1931 essay "Female Sexuality," that a woman's relationship to her husband will reawaken her pre-oedipal relationship to her mother—that indeed, it is only a reflection of that far more profoundly significant relation—the Alien and the death battle Ripley wages against it themselves come to seem offshoots of the greater, and even deadlier, conflict between mother and daughter.²¹

Access to Mother, the onboard ship computer, is initially the privilege of only Dallas and science officer Ash. After Dallas dies, Ripley announces to Ash, "I have access to Mother now." This access, however, leads only to grim knowledge, as Ripley learns of the Company's special directive that the *Nostromo* make the capture of the Alien specimen—to be used for their bioweapons program—their top priority, and that the "crew is expendable." Learning this leads Ripley to weep for the first time and then to lash out angrily at Ash. This pattern corresponds to the one Freud laid out: behind the husband figure (Dallas) lies the Mother and the conflict and loss inherent in the mother-daughter bond. This pattern only intensifies as Ripley, attempting to destroy the Alien, programs the ship to self-destruct. Mother not only fails to assist Ripley in destroying the Alien, which Ripley cannot elude, but also fails to protect her daughter. Desperately fleeing from the Alien's clutches, Ripley runs back to Mother, trying to circumvent the self-destruct sequence. She fails to stop it within only a second or two: "Mother," Ripley pleads, "I stopped the self-destruct sequence!" Mother's response is stonily indifferent: she announces that the self-destruction of the ship will occur in five minutes. "Mother!" Ripley cries, in an Achilles-like fury. "You *bitch!*" At this, she whales her gun upon a computer console—Mother's extruded

cyberflesh—smashing it to smithereens. Who is Ripley's greater foe—the Alien or the unyielding, pitiless Mother?

Adding to the typing of Ripley as daughter is the scene in which she hears, from a remote distance on an intercom, the cries of suffering from Parker and Lambert as they are annihilated by the Alien. These cries, particularly Lambert's, are weirdly erotic in tone, sounding just as much like sexual intercourse as they do murder. (In Lambert's case, they also sound like infant cries.) Ripley's detached but fixated aural position to these cries places her, from the perspective of psychoanalytic theory, in the position of the child who witnesses, in this case through sound rather than sight, the primal scene and its attendant terrors.

We see, in a series of extraordinary shots, the Alien killing first Parker, then Lambert. When Lambert is killed, we see the Alien's long, dark, phallic tail insinuatingly reaching between Lambert's legs, a clear rape metaphor. If anything, the killing of Parker is even more disorientingly eroticized. As the large, physically strong, courageous Parker is held against his will by the looming, infinitely stronger, implacable Alien, he resembles a child himself in an adult's grasp, the infant about to be fed, albeit an infant desperately resisting a feeding that makes the *infant* the meal.

As the Alien hypnotically opens its jaws, transparent fluid streams from its metallic, murderous mouth, in another horrifying parody of the nursing mother and the slaving sexually ravenous male at once. When the Alien's phallic, protuberant inner jaw shoots out into Parker's flesh, a specific echo of Kane's violation, the image reinforces the film's unusually obsessed interest in the violation of males and also, more distantly, its evocation of another key Melvillean theme, the male susceptibility to shipboard rape.²² Few films have more vividly thematized and visually allegorized male-male sexual penetration and the varieties of male-male rape: the Alien's penetration of Parker fuses oral sex-as-rape with anal rape. These symbolic representations of fellatio and sodomy make each act a form of violent violation of one male by another. The Alien's wet, deadly, metal-toothed mouth also evokes, with more familiar fearfulness, the *vagina dentata*, an enduring phobic image of woman's sexuality as monstrously phallic. This welter of provocative and disturbing images will be reworked, in his characteristically intertextual manner, by James Cameron in his sequel to Scott's film.

Racing to aid her doomed colleagues, Ripley discovers their mangled, bloody bodies, hanging like meat in an abattoir. The strong suggestion is that sexual intercourse of *any* kind—given the sexualized imagery in the depictions of the murders of both Parker and Lambert—is pernicious and deadly. When on the shuttle, having abandoned ship with the only other survivor, Jonesy the cat, Ripley defiantly whispers, "I got you. You son of a bitch, I got you." These lines are deeply telling. The Alien truly is son to the Mother that

Ripley denounced as “bitch.” In league with the Mother’s incaltrant reign, the Alien is both the phallic son whose privileged gendered identity leads him toward social triumph in the master narrative of psychoanalysis and the inescapable suitor whose erotic machinations finally ensnare the woman despite her constant deferrals of his offers.

In many ways, Robin Wood was right to see this as a reactionary film, about both femininity and sexuality. Yet the film undergoes, I argue, an ideological transformation in its final act, in its depiction of the woman’s retaliation against this suitor, one the heroine finally does manage to elude. *Alien* aligns itself with an intransigent feminism. Surprisingly enough, though, it is precisely this feminist turn that critics not only missed but mistook for a turn toward unforgivable sexism.

Once in the shuttle, believing she has destroyed the Alien along with the *Nostramo*, Ripley undresses down to T-shirt and underwear. Ripley’s *dishabille* in this climax has been highly controversial throughout the critical history of the film, the common reading being that the film misogynistically objectifies its daring heroine.²³ While acknowledging that having the strong, pragmatic Ripley stripping down to a T-shirt and underwear has clear sexist overtones, in that her intelligence is compromised in her conversion into sexual display, I believe this moment is also complexly affecting and resonant in ways that have rarely been acknowledged. Sexism may not be the only thing at work here. Shorn of her protective gear, Ripley now physically assumes the symbolic role the film has already placed her in: the child before bed, asking her Mother not to turn off the lights, not to blow up the ship. Beyond this, Ripley stands before us not just as an erotic display but as a corporeal, poignantly pliant human being, in stark contrast to the armored, phallic Alien whose acid bleed seethes and singses. In contrast to this beast of *defensiveness*, Ripley is like an expressionist nude: vulnerable, human, defenseless.

In a stunning prefiguring of the onscreen transformations that will be so crucial to the later films, Ripley transforms in a flash into the tough female astronaut-cum-warrior when she discovers the Alien on board the shuttle, crouching within the steel rods from which it is, in repose, indistinguishable. The Alien makes its presence known to Ripley by shooting out its arm at her, a gesture either absent or intentional. This is yet another metaphor of failed intimacy in the film, *the failed embrace*. (A similar theme runs throughout *Carrie* and may indeed define modern horror.) Ripley slips into a spacesuit, plotting her strategy all the while, as the Alien, in flickering, strobe-lit, almost slow-motion footage, languorously, autoerotically flexes its limbs, slowly extending its inner mouth, now covered with especially viscous white, semenlike fluid, as it breathes heavily, yet another sexually suggestive effect. At this point, the Alien has come to signify solitary, masturbatory self-contentment, a scene of

male sexual self-sufficiency and plenitude that mocks Ripley's own having put her sexuality to sleep.²⁴

Then again, this display also allows Ripley to access an unprecedented phallic power all her own, as she successfully and literally smokes out the Alien and shoots him with her spear gun as he is sucked out into space. Access to phallic authority compensates for barred access to Mother. Having escaped the Mother who attempted not to engulf but to destroy her—the ship self-destructs as Ripley detaches the shuttle from its “umbilicus” and races away to almost unreachable safe distance—Ripley now destroys the suitor who has extended Mother's reign. The significance of *Alien* is its depiction of a Persephone at war with Demeter and the dark rapist and underworld King of Hell at once. This theme is a continuation of the central one of the classical Hollywood woman's film: that of the woman's solitary independence as both pleasurable and a predicament with onerous consequences.

***Aliens*: Reimagining Demeter**

Commonly, James Cameron's 1986 sequel to the original *Alien* film has been read as a reactionary retooling of the Ripley character that transforms her renegade femininity into the decidedly less radical one of the Reagan-era supermom, associating her as well with American military power and attendant hostility to foreign threat. While these readings retain their validity, they don't encompass all the gendered themes of Cameron's film. Within this conservative epic lie the strands of another, more pronouncedly feminist narrative: a reimagining of the Demeter-Persephone myth, one as challenging as the militaristic and gender-normative aspects of the film are troubling. The first film cast Ripley in the role of Persephone, at war with mothers and masculinity; this new film not only refashions her as Demeter but also refashions the Demeter of the classical myth as a woman warrior who actively invades hell to rescue her abducted daughter. These themes deeply inform Cameron's 2009 global 3-D sensation *Avatar* as well (which reunites Cameron and Sigourney Weaver) but are much more richly developed in the 1986 film.

In the myth, Demeter's grief over the loss of her daughter, which she transmutes into a nuclear-winter rage, leads her to wander the earth mournfully and angrily; it also leads her, in the Ovidian version, to consult her fellow gods, who cajole her into accepting Hades's abduction and rape of her daughter. Hades, the god of hell, is Persephone's uncle; her father, Zeus, king of the gods and Demeter's brother, remains in Ovid unmoved in the face of Demeter's accusatory request to him that he intervene and force Hades to return Persephone to her. Finally, a bargain is struck: Persephone will spend six months on Earth with her mother, the other as Hades's bride and the queen of hell.²⁵

Aliens initially presents Ripley, asleep and adrift along with the cat Jonesy, in her shuttle, as a kind of Persephone: the daughter caught between worlds, floating throughout space for more than fifty years by the time the Company discovers the drifting craft. Wiping off the glittering frost that has accumulated on the hypersleep pod, one of the salvage-team workers reveals the still pristine, slumbering bodies of woman and feline, glimmering in the dark. In an extraordinary effect that textualizes the mythic underpinnings of the film, Ripley transforms from Sleeping Beauty to the figure of the Great Mother. The close-up of Ripley's sleeping face dissolves into a close-up of the earth itself, to which she is returned. As her visage dissolves into the verdant face of the planet, Ripley transforms into Demeter, the goddess of the earth. If Persephone in her guises as maiden and queen signifies the duality of feminine subjectivity, the wandering of grieving Demeter connotes female loss and anger. Ripley transforms from the Persephone-like Sleeping Beauty into the wandering Demeter, adrift in space for decades, who now rejoins the earth. The strange effect of this transformation as it is engineered, however, is to suggest, with great brevity, that her flesh necrotizes in the process, becoming old and haggard, finally skeletal, before it merges with green continental expanses and swirling blue seas. The sudden suggestions of advanced age startlingly echo the portions of the Demeter-Persephone myth in which grieving, wandering Demeter dons the guise of an old woman and takes brief shelter in this form with a human family, whose son she cares for (and attempts to turn into a god before his mother accidentally interrupts the process). Ripley as Earth Mother is both life-giving matrix and global force of decay and death.

Interestingly, Ripley never actually makes it back to Earth soil, in this or any of the four films; here, she is on an adjacent Earth space station. In a striking scene on the space station that was cut from the theatrical release, much to Sigourney Weaver's chagrin (the actor claimed she had based her entire performance on it), but restored to the director-approved special edition DVD, Ripley discovers the fate of her daughter, who has already died at the age of 66. Burke (Paul Reiser), the initially sympathetic but ultimately duplicitous and murderous Company man who brings Ripley back to the Alien home world, hands her a photo of her daughter. Ripley looks at the photo, and she sees an image of a woman verging on old age, much older than herself and also smiling, peaceful, and happy. "Amy," Ripley says, with sad amazement, recognizing her young daughter even in the face of this much older woman, who looks like she could easily be Ripley's mother. In a dazzlingly eerie moment, the daughter and the mother switch temporal places, the aged, dead daughter looking back at the young, living mother. (The woman in the photograph is Weaver's own mother, deepening the resonances of the scene.) This theme of women looking at each other across a divide will saturate the film, an exchange of looks that will

be used to negotiate a wide range of responses and tensions. The chief work of the film will be to restore a daughter to Ripley, in the person of Newt (Carrie Henn), a young girl who is the only survivor of the mining colony besieged and colonized by the Aliens. The tense, chaotic action of this *ur*-action film narrows into a battle between Ripley and the looming, monstrous Alien Queen over this child.

The militaristic aspect of the film comes in the form of the Colonial Marines with whom Ripley and Burke, as well as the android Bishop (Lance Henriksen), a new “synthetic,” travel to LV426, the alien planet from the first film on which the Company has now established a terra-forming community of workers and their families. The gender norming of the *Alien* story emerges from the emphasis on family in the film, with Ripley, the 1970s career woman who eschews romance and family, now installed as family’s arch protector. Critics have been frustrated especially by these aspects of the film. Constance Penley, articulating general views, writes that “Ripley is, again, the bravest and smartest member of the team. But this time there is a difference, one that is both improbable and symptomatic. Ripley ‘develops’ a maternal instinct . . . Ripley is thus marked by a difference that is automatically taken to be a sign of femininity. (We do not see Hicks, for example—played by Michael Biehn, who was Kyle Reese in *The Terminator*—acting irrationally in order to rescue a child who is probably already dead.)” “*Aliens* reintroduces the issue of sexual difference,” Penley argues, to offer a “conservative lesson about maternity”: “mothers will be mothers, and they will *always* be women.”²⁶

While its ideologically adamant maneuvers seem to cast the film in the mode of the reactionary revenge flick—imperialist war fantasy (Cameron did after all write the script for the second *Rambo* film from 1985), one that upholds Reagan-era family values with regressive returns to a domestic model of femininity, there is another way in which the film transcends all of these associations in its development of a *counternarrative* with both feminist and queer resonances. This counternarrative stems not only from a reimagining of the Demeter-Persephone myth but also from the ways in which the myth is redeployed to emphasize ties that are nonbiological. The little girl Newt is someone *else’s* daughter; Ripley is someone else’s mother. The bond they form is an emotional solidarity developed out of mutual respect as well as situational demands. Their bond is also an ironic joke, one played on the military force so brazenly, foolishly confident at the start of the film: normally the ones to be saved first, the woman and child do the saving in this film.

The nonbiological nature of the mother-daughter bond here lends itself to queer interpretations of the film. While the later films have more commonly been read in queer terms, *Aliens* has no less suggestive queer resonances.²⁷ In addition to the nonbiological mother-daughter bond, the retooled android

of the film, Bishop, sweet of soul where Ash was sinister, importantly adds to the creation of a nonnormative family structure. Characters such as the tough female soldier Vasquez (Jenette Goldstein)—a rousing example of the butch dyke on film—and the surprisingly gentle Hicks also disrupt gender-normative typing.²⁸

As Catherine Constable argues, the “presentation of Ripley and Newt as an image of generational continuity enables the pair to function as a trope for the entire human species.”²⁹ In this essay, Constable makes different uses of Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, offering points of disagreement with Barbara Creed’s Kristevan reading of the film. “Creed borrows from Kristeva in arguing that the threat posed by the horror film is that of the dissolution of the subject. The representation of the figure of the mother is the return of that which has to be rejected and suppressed in order for the subject to exist at all.” As Constable continues,

Creed’s account of the abjection of the maternal figure is problematic, however, in that she fails to trace it back to the child’s development and therefore to comment on the mother’s relation to matter . . . Kristeva’s account of the processes of abjection links the maternal body to physical matter in two ways. First, the child establishes a bodily contour through acts of expulsion, which form that which is to be considered “outside” the boundary, typically the mother’s body and dead matter. Second, the bodily division between inside and outside sets up the skin as a container which holds in the palpable stuff of physicality like muscles and blood . . . For Kristeva, the reemergence of the maternal “inside” is horrific rather than uncanny because the processes of abjection involve expulsion and ultimately suppression.³⁰

Where Constable disagrees with Creed is in her lack of attention to the issue of matter and the materiality of the body in Kristeva; my disagreement with Creed’s theory of the monstrous-feminine in film is that she views the cinematic figure of the archaic mother as unremittingly negative and phobic, as forever the devouring, voracious maw of misogynistic womb dread. The archaic mother is not only present in the figure of the terrible, endlessly menacing Alien Queen; the archaic mother is also there in the symbolic presence of Demeter, present here in the reimagined figure of Ripley, just as it will be in the vast, overarching, shimmering, golden-green mother-tree-goddess of *Avatar*, an astonishingly softheaded film the most resonant aspect of which is its ardent depiction of fervent desire to return to the mother.³¹ Indeed, its view of patriarchy, figured in infernal war machines, homicidal honchos, and military might, is so garishly negative as to be a desire for the eradication of masculinity altogether (which may account for the amazingly desexualized, androgynous depiction of blue-giant Avatar males).

Creed leaves Demeter out of her study, focusing instead on the archaic mother “present in all horror films as the blackness of extinction—death.”³² But the cinematic representation of the archaic mother, as the example of Ripley as Demeter demonstrates, can have other properties as well. As a symbol of the human species and intergenerational continuity, the image of Ripley and Newt constantly reformulated throughout the film—Ripley and Newt looking out into the uncertain darkness after the shuttle that will rescue them crashes, their growing bond their only certainty; Ripley carrying Newt to her bed, sitting on the bed as Newt lies down; Ripley carrying Newt as she rescues her from the adhesive prison of her cocooning, the face-hugger parasite, and the lair of the Queen; Ripley holding Newt on the shuttle after they’ve escaped, looking at the girl as Newt says, “I knew you’d come,” and kissing her; Ripley putting Newt to bed, telling her that now they can both dream (in a moment that returns Ripley to the nighttime-ritual undress of the first film’s final scenes and has vaguely erotic-incestuous undertones)—stands in not just for mothers and daughters but for *all* human beings. Given that the image of humankind that hegemonic culture puts forth is that of either the heterosexual couple, the eternal Adam and Eve, or the Michelangelo image of a muscular yet softly sensual Adam languorously reaching his hand out to the white-haired patriarchal God who also reaches out to him, this image of woman and girl as index of humanity is a radical one, especially the frequent one of Ripley holding Newt. The implications of this image are rich, and central to the claims of this chapter.

The image of woman holding child evokes the Madonna and Christ Child as well the *Pietà*, Michelangelo’s 1499 sculpture that depicts the Virgin Mother holding her dead son, the crucified Jesus; it evokes birth and death, nurture and obliquity, love and loss. *Aliens* deploys the Christian-mythic qualities of the mother-son image in generalized ways that exceed its historical and cultural precedents. It cross-fertilizes the Christian precedents with Greek myth, which is to say it reminds us of the ways in which the Christian image is saturated *with* Greek myth. It takes these interfused traditions to a new cinematic myth-making level that not only secularizes and universalizes but also denatures the mother-child relationship, for Ripley is saving not just the daughter but also the son, not shown but suggested through the associations called up by the mother-child image. Moreover, Ripley is saving not just the daughter but also herself. To do all of this, she must confront a monster that is a distorted, fun-house-mirror version of *herself*, through the device of an imperiled child. In other words, the rescue of the child provides the means whereby Ripley enacts a confrontation with an opponent who contains knowledge of and who synthesizes disturbances within her own psychic life, continuing the allegorical pattern of the first film.

Running throughout the *Alien* films is what I have called the endless primal scene, complexly conveyed by signifiers of adult sexuality and a child’s horrified,

fascinated experience of them; certainly, the various Medusan motifs of the titular monsters convey the sense of the horror of adult sexuality. Moreover, the Alien Queen, with her grotesquely distended egg-laying sac and web of ensnaring, inescapable adhesive fluids, registers Freudian fears of the “terrifying genitals” of the Medusan mother; the extended, multipronged crest of her head suggests Medusa’s wildly extending snaky locks.³³ In the confrontation between Ripley and the Queen, she is once again Persephone, but this time confronting a terrible chthonic *mother* figure rather than the king of hell. At the same time, Ripley as Demeter confronts a gender-bent *queen* of hell. This dizzying collapse of mythic referents and gender signifiers all occurs within a scene of female-female struggle. (While male-typed Alien warrior-sentries do appear in the scene, their role is entirely secondary to it; like worker bees or ants, they exist only to protect the Queen.) The scene then, an index of the film’s themes, reimagines all human conflict—desire, nostalgia for origins, fear of the Other, war—within the figure of the feminine. The feminine becomes the organizing principle of human life, its logic, its character, its face; the markers of masculinity, phallic guns so huge they must be slung over the body, function as decorative touches that adorn femininity, the female inverse of fillets, feminine laurel leaves that adorned the celebrated male athletes of the classical world.³⁴

The Alien Queen can be interpreted as Bruno Bettelheim’s figure of the ugly evil stepmother who embodies all the negative qualities the child cannot acknowledge in his or her own mother, or as Jung’s Terrible Mother as opposed to Ripley’s Good Mother. She also represents, in more recent psychoanalytic terms, the mother of judgment, who loathes and shames the child by regarding it with contempt. The mother of judgment’s eyes function as conduits of shame: they transfer this affect from mother to child. The seething Alien Queen regards Ripley and Newt with the most murderous contempt imaginable; her heavy breathing and hissing convey the sense of indescribable hate at the very sight of this human pair. Fascinatingly, the Aliens appear to be eyeless; it’s never made clear how they see (they may “see” through smell). The eyeless Queen who regards Ripley and Newt with such seething contempt is a kind of mirror image of the shaming mother who sees nothing good in the child, whose eyes impart shame; her eyelessness signifies not a lack of seeing but a seeing that is so total in its contempt and rage that it obliterates itself, just as the Queen threatens to obliterate what it sees before it.³⁵

What gives this entire spectacle of shaming its radical charge is the queer typing of Ripley *as mother*. With her short hair and male garb, Ripley combines the masculine and the feminine; with her casual indifference to heterosexual sex, despite some no-sweat flirtation with Hicks, she suggests the possibility of different sexual tastes and needs. With her adoption of a child, she suggests the lesbian mother who thinks outside the normative procreational box. The Alien

Queen's vicious contempt conveys the charge of an old, customary inability to recognize the beauty and heroism in queer love that Ripley and Newt embody. Read as a queer allegory, Ripley, Newt, the reintegrated android Bishop, and the wounded, vulnerable, bedridden Hicks together constitute the new queer family, the Alien Queen a repository of old modes of contempt and hate.

Along these lines, it is no accident at all that the Queen so decisively violates and attempts to destroy Bishop. The queer male cyborg figure is no less the target of the Queen's annihilating campaign than queer woman and child. Milky android fluid bursts out of his mouth, gushing in torrents, as the Alien Queen pierces his body in midtorso with her long, immensely powerful phallic tail and rips it in two. Bishop, the cyborg retooled as queer suffering body, is an example of a resistant masculinity devoid of any obvious sexual desire. Such figures suggest queer sexuality in films and television series in that their refusal of the normative codes of masculinity suggests an alternative to them. As with Ash, but much more pitifully, the white blood that drenches Bishop suggests both mother's milk and semen. But in a radical decontextualization, semen here, as it usually does not in film, suggests the vulnerability of male bodies, their susceptibility to violation. This substance would go on to make quite a visible mark on subsequent films ranging from *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) to *There's Something About Mary* (1998) to the numerous *American Pie* films and beyond, sometimes similarly signaling male vulnerability, more often anything but.³⁶ Bishop suggests an obscene parody of an infant being nursed, burping up and dribbling milk; more perversely still, his predicament suggests fellatio gone disastrously awry, a poignant reinterpretation of Parker's death by oral penetration as well as Ash's horrific death scene in *Alien*. Bishop is thus linked to Ripley as a gender-bending figure, marked with traditional signs of femininity (milk, the nurture of infants) just as she is marked by those of masculinity, never more dramatically than when she dons the obdurate metal flesh of the power loader to defeat the Queen. The confusion of gender signifiers here—the male and female qualities combining within each character—gives off a queer charge.

Critics have traditionally read in derisive terms the family structure successfully created by the end of the film—Ripley mommy, Hicks daddy, Newt child, Bishop nanny. But from another perspective, this is also a radical *queer* family, one that puts the normative father to bed and produces two queer parents, a feminized male who pumps out geysers of mother's milk and a woman who accesses phallic masculinity as well as feminine tenderness. The gentle military leader Hicks and the initially abrasive but ultimately courageous and heroic Latina-lesbian Vasquez also defy gendered and cultural expectations. Moreover, the horribly split-bodied Bishop nevertheless heroically saves Newt as well as himself when the air whooshing out through the ship's opened doors during Ripley's battle with the Queen threatens to carry all survivors out into space.

The physical and emotional transformations endemic to the genre of the woman's film, in all of its genre permutations (melodrama, horror, science fiction, revenge flick, romantic comedy), make a particularly important contribution to the power of the *Alien* films generally, the second film specifically. Ripley's transformations on a physical level signify those happening on an emotional one. When we first see her, her long hair suggests Sleeping Beauty, Snow White (which she is called, derisively, by Vasquez), and other fairytale heroines; her textual transmutation into the earth goddess Demeter, through the dissolve of her face into Earth, prepares us for her role as a mother, symbolic in the theatrical cut, literal in the full version of the film. She still has long hair during her meeting with the Company executives, who accuse her of malfeasance in the blowing up of the *Nostramo* in the first film. In these early scenes, Ripley's long but unglamorously made-up hair and somewhat antiseptic, corporate, bland outfit (particularly as she is shown standing juxtaposed with scrolling images of the other characters from the first *Alien*, with *their* period looks) suggests a continuation of 1970s feminism. Evoking 1970s feminism, the naturally beautiful Ripley seems to eschew allegiance to traditional feminine beauty culture. (The tough, butch woman in a suit who grills Ripley at this tribunal reads, in phobic terms, as an ERA-activist 1970s lesbian.) Yet her cutting of her hair in the next scene—not that we see her cutting it, only that it has been cut—is a different kind of gender statement. Her new short hair not only masculinizes her but also, in the way that it is styled, updates her and shows us that she is now a woman of contemporary time, not a relic of another era. Her masculinized hair announces that she is a woman ready for action, a female Achilles who initially balks at fighting but, once engaged in it, fights valiantly and violently.

Ripley's transformations combine radicalism and reaction here. Obviously, the fetishization of militarism and gun culture in this film connote the latter, as does the mommification of the character. (It's disheartening indeed to see that, even for prominent critics like Henry Jenkins, it is precisely this fetishized militarism that endures as the chief cultural investment of the film, with its afterlife in video games.³⁷ And despite the ardent maternalism and antimasculinity of *Avatar*, it is also fully and dizzyingly a sustained fetishistic investment in this militarism: in a nod to the equally softheaded film that influenced Cameron's, we could call *Avatar Dances with Flying Tanks*.)

Yet, as we have seen, this latter quality is also subjected to numerous qualifications throughout the film, which leads to the disparate set of associations audience members can have to Ripley as mother. For perhaps the most radical dimension of the film is the ways in which it allows us to think of Ripley in her relation to Newt not as mother but simply as a fellow human being, linked to another by affection, respect, and peril. The mother-child bond is a major cultural signifier imposed upon this pair of women warriors, not only by the film at

times (“Mommy,” Newt superfluously says to victorious but spent Ripley after she has dispatched the Alien Queen), but also by the culture in which the film emerged. In other words, the mother-child bond is yet another normative narrative that female transformation resists even as it accommodates. The female relationships and female identities in this and the other films, undergoing constant resignifications, suggest transformational new meanings that exceed and continue to have a life beyond the textual and referential spaces of the films.

CHAPTER 5

The Finalizing Woman

Horror, Femininity, and Queer Monsters

The chief subject of this book has been the ways in which female protagonists of the woman's film and horror film transform within cinematic narrative and the significance of this transformation. Barbara Creed, in her reading of the horror film, argues that it expresses and defends against a fear of return to the archaic mother and her mawlike, devouring womb. Despite my admiration for her work, I argue against Creed that horror film also, perhaps even more ardently, expresses a powerful desire to return to the mother and to origins, to a state of total oneness with the world (the mother's body indistinguishable from the child's body) that psychoanalytic theory calls primary narcissism. Loss of connection with one's mother pervades the genres of the woman's film and the horror film, as well as psychoanalysis. The mythic precedent for both psychoanalysis and these film genres is the myth of Demeter and Persephone, in which Persephone, the maiden daughter of Demeter, the mother-grain goddess, is abducted by Hades, the king of hell, leading to her mother's world-destroying grief. While Demeter's grief occupies a considerable amount of the myth's narrative, other themes it foregrounds are the young woman's struggle between her desires to remain with her mother and to be married, marriage as a social death for women, and marriage and heterosexual male desire as hellish.

As I have been arguing, *Psycho* and the horror woman's films of the early 1960s (*What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*; *Hush . . . Hush*, *Sweet Charlotte*; *Strait-Jacket*) inaugurated modern horror, which focuses on anxieties over sexuality and the family, often conflating the two. Some horror films take a more oedipal form, fueled by a fundamental antagonism between son and father. Some horror movies, though, take the form of the Persephone complex, being principally about a struggle between a mother (or some other kind of maternal

figure) and her child. Interestingly, this persephonal horror movie can feature—indeed, perhaps more often does feature—males in the traditionally female role, males who struggle over their competing desires to stay with and flee from the mother. What makes such narratives persephonal rather than oedipal is that the males have never stopped desiring, on some level, their mothers. In the traditional process of the Oedipus complex, the male learns to stop desiring the mother; indeed, he learns how to reject her. He learns to stop competing against the father for possession of the mother, to identify with the father, and to desire a woman outside of the family, thereby escaping the threats of incest and patricide at once. But in the male version of the Persephone complex, the male still desires the mother and wants to stay with her, which has implications for the male's sexuality, since psychoanalysis, as does the horror film, types these males as queer, even though there is no reason to understand the male Persephone complex as one exclusively relevant to queer males—far from it. In Freud's highly controversial and, for many decades, quite influential theory of male homosexuality, this orientation derives from a male's identification with maternal rather than paternal desire, and concomitant rejection of and alienation from the father. Freud was casting male homosexuality as one of the variations of the “negative Oedipus complex,” but we can more properly term it not just a variant but, indeed, the normative form of the male Persephone complex.

As Carol J. Clover writes of the serial killer Jame Gumb in *The Silence of the Lambs*, “In the long and rich tradition in which he is a member, the issue would appear to be not homosexuality and heterosexuality but the failure to achieve a functional sexuality of any kind.”¹ Given the heated controversies that have attended the reception of *Silence's* representation of Jame Gumb, which many critics have responded to as a homophobic portrait of a gay man, Clover's point is especially helpful. It is precisely Gumb's *lack* of a definitive sexual identity that, I argue, makes him such a problematic figure in critical treatments of the film, the way in which the character eludes a classifiable sexuality. As I have argued elsewhere, Gumb cannot be reduced to a representation of the “homosexual” male, though he *can* be called a queer male. He is a blur of masculine styles, types, affects, and sexual signifiers, a collage of masculinities.² The tradition from which Gumb emerges, however, *does* suggest a much more specific sexuality. “Whatever else he may be,” as Clover herself writes, Jame Gumb, or, “Buffalo Bill,” “is the clear brother of Norman Bates, Leatherface [from *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*], Jason [Voorhees, from the *Friday the 13th* films], Mark (of *Peeping Tom*), and the rest: a male who is a physical adult but a spiritual child, locked in the embrace of his mother.”³ Given the pervasive influence of Freud's theory of male homosexuality—complex and suggestive as well as vexing but perniciously deployed in American psychiatry for many decades in order to pathologize same-sex sexual desire—in which the male locked in his mother's embrace is the homosexual

male, the horror movie's iconic image of the mother-son relationship inescapably evokes Freud's theory and therefore cultural as well as theoretical views of homosexual identity and its ever-elusive "cause."

In this chapter, I enlarge this book's focus to include horror films in which it is the male character who desires and longs to return to the mother. As discussed in [Chapter 3](#) and by innumerable other critics, *Psycho* is the major precedent for this horror theme. In its last quarter, Lila Crane (Vera Miles)—the sister of Marion Crane (Janet Leigh), murdered by the motel proprietor Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins)—investigates the Bates house, looking for Mrs. Bates, Norman's mother, whom he claims is alive and in the house but is actually now a mummified corpse, preserved by Norman after he murdered her and her lover. Lila's investigation of Mrs. Bates's bedroom, Norman's room, and the basement is intercut with shots of Norman having an increasingly tense conversation with Sam Loomis (John Gavin), Marion's boyfriend, one that ends in violence as Norman conks Sam on the head and races back to the Bates house. This entire sequence is at once a crucial pattern for the male persephonal horror film and a striking examination of the mother-daughter themes of both melodrama and Hitchcockian horror.

Of chief concern to us here is the way in which the sequence pits a woman attempting to restore order against a male whose errant sexuality has disordered narrative. In Lila Crane's investigation of Mother's room, the film stages a confrontation between femininity and the grieving and also terrifying mother that runs throughout the woman's film as well as modern horror. Though a reading that makes a salutary case for the importance of the character of Lila Crane, Alexander Doty's argument that she is a "brash, heroic dyke" does not, to my mind, accurately depict a character who acts as a *normalizing* force in the film, bringing Norman's depravities almost literally to light. But in another way, Doty does have a point, and we can establish that the genealogy of the lesbian slayer of queer males, which figure we discuss later in this chapter, indeed begins with Lila Crane.⁴

The sequence matches this persephonal female struggle against a male one that is equally, if anything more emphatically, persephonal. Indeed, it is the woman who is shown to be progressing toward freedom *from* the mother—her taut aliveness contrasted with the corpse mother's deadness—and the male who is shown to be locked in an eternal union with her, as the famous image of Mother's grinning skull-face superimposed over Norman Bates's face at the end of the film attests. *Psycho's* brilliant synthesis of the themes of transformation and longing for the mother established a template for many of the most significant horror films made after it: horror film as persephonal, whether male or female in its focus.

Made in the wake of *Psycho*, films such as Tobe Hooper's 1974 *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, David Cronenberg's 1983 *The Dead Zone*, the *Friday the 13th* series, and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) all posit as the source of their male monsters' monstrosity some anguished and destructive problem within the mother-son relationship. *Silence* conjoins this theme with a woman's narrative that competes with and overpowers the monster's own, thus allegorizing the woman's film relationship to modern horror. *Silence* professionalizes, as it were, the woman's relationship to the monster: it makes it the heroine's *job* to kill the monster. Many films stage confrontations between the monstrous male and a resourceful woman: the Final Girl. The Final Girl, as Carol J. Clover theorizes her, is the last woman to survive the bloodbath and who faces off at the climax with the monstrous killer—*Psycho*'s Lila Crane, Laurie in John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), innumerable women in the *Friday the 13th* series, and many, many others. In this chapter, I revisit Clover's theory in light of the themes of female transformation central to this study.

Silence and the final two *Alien* films starring Sigourney Weaver represent the terminus point for modern horror. What followed these films has been post-modern horror and then a post-postmodern period that I call "genre-hybridic," both markedly different from the tones and themes of modern horror works.⁵ Postmodern horror—ironic, knowing, self-referential—is exemplified by Wes Craven's *Scream* films, which managed, at their best, to be scary as well as deconstructively "meta," with all of their allusions to other horror films, in-jokes, and brazen self-awareness. They do not, however, represent anything like an advance in the political and aesthetic potentialities of the horror genre. (In terms of this study, what is most interesting about them is their depiction of the rampant, adulterous sexual desire of the heroine's mother, which the films represent as pernicious. There is little exploration in any of the films about the heroine's relationship to her mother but only the detailed examination of the mayhem her illicit trysts continue to produce in her daughter's life. The queer typing of the killers in the first film of the series interestingly plays on *Psycho*'s themes while reinstalling that film's view of maternal sexuality as lethal, though without the considerable poignancy of Hitchcock's treatment of oppressive relationships.) The post-9/11 decade of American film horror has been principally shaped by three kinds of films, all of which can be seen as a reaction against the deconstructive detachment and jokiness of the *Scream* films: the emergent torture-porn genre, led by the *Saw* films and Eli Roth's *Hostel* series; Asian horror and its ever-increasing American remakes (*The Ring* [Gore Verbinski, 2002], *The Grudge* [Takashi Shimizu, 2004], *Black Water* [Walter Salles, 2005]); and the reboot-remake of previous horror classics, exemplified by the new Michael Bay-produced conceptualizations of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Friday the 13th* and Rob Zombie's brilliant, quite frustrating, and entirely unpleasant new

versions of the first two *Halloween* films. What is striking about Zombie's *Halloween* films is the way in which they spectacularly reestablish, especially in the 2009 *Halloween II*, the family as the central theme and trauma of the horror film. "Family Is Forever," announces the grim poster for this film, the tagline looming above the image of a particularly apocalyptic Michael Myers holding up an immense knife, his trademark white-painted William Shatner mask cracked, torn, and a necrotic gray. No horror film makes the longing for return to the mother more vividly, harrowingly potent than Zombie's *Halloween II*. The film opens with a scene between the adolescent Michael Myers, who slaughtered his older sister, her boyfriend, and his mother's boyfriend, talking to his mother (Sheri Moon Zombie, wife of the director) in the gleaming white sanitarium in which Michael has been institutionalized. They sweetly talk, flirt, laugh; she tickles him. Then there is a violent cut to the title against a black backdrop. The title, the *name* of the film—in other words, the imposition of the Symbolic order, founded in the Name of the Father, his language and law—eradicates the scene of mother-son love, here shown to be a prior state of blissful connection that must be abandoned, but at great cost. The dissevering of the mother-son bond is the traumatic event from which the film's oceans of blood flow.

Michael's mother gives him a model of a white horse, which Michael says reminds him of a figure that appeared in one of his dreams. Dream images of the mother, an immense white horse, and the young, institutionalized Michael appear before the adult Michael throughout the film, forming an endlessly troped allegory of mother-son desire. As the immense, implacable Michael embarks on his unstoppable killing spree, his mother, the white horse, and his past child self simultaneously impel him to kill (even appearing to assist in the killing) and beckon the adult Michael to rejoin them, but not without Angel Myers, Michael's younger sister, known to us and to herself as the would-be heroine Laurie Strode (Scout Taylor-Compton), who was played by Jamie Lee Curtis in Carpenter's original and its first sequel. In Zombie's film, Michael's mother commits suicide after he kills a nurse in the sanitarium. With her erotically lithe body and snowy, sorceress hair, Michael's dead mother looms above him as the triple goddess of Freud's "Three Caskets," mother-wife-death, a point emphasized by the doubling of the child and adult Michael (though any suggestion of a heterosexual relationship with the "wife" is inconceivable in a series centered on a serial killer who destroys evidence of heterosexuality on sight). Indeed, the figure of Michael's fame-seeking former psychiatrist Dr. Loomis (a shout-out name to *Psycho*, played here by Malcolm McDowell, replacing Donald Pleasance in the original version) stands in quite explicitly for Freud, making a grisly joke before a packed audience about Michael's difficulties resolving his Oedipus complex. "Was it nature or nurture?" a befuddled reporter asks Loomis regarding the cause of his former patient's madness; Loomis gives a cryptic answer

that draws upon George Bernard Shaw, suggesting that he doesn't know the answer either and emphasizing his pretentiousness. But the film knows, depicting Michael's mother-obsession as the logic of his evil.

The recent reboot-remakes of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Friday the 13th*, and *Halloween* reestablish the significance of the slasher film, broadly defined, to horror, perhaps because it is the genre that makes mother-son bonds—so repudiated within patriarchy, which socializes both its male and female subjects to reject the mother and to identify with and emulate the father—particularly prominent. Yet it is also a genre that emphasizes a woman's transformation, and in this regard has a surprising overlap with the classical Hollywood woman's film. The slasher film foregrounds the heroine's maturation from an awkward, unsure young woman to a fully fledged adult woman. Slasher horror movies are like sped-up, phallically fueled female bildungsromans in which women rapidly develop into their adult versions, coming of age through frantic stress and murderous, if retaliatory, bloodletting.

As Gregory Nagy demonstrates in his classic study *The Best of the Achaeans*, the hero of classical myth is always *unseasonal*—somehow out of time, or in sped-up or agonizingly distended time.⁶ If, as I have been arguing, archetypal patterns inhere in genre film, the slasher-film heroine's identity bears a striking resemblance to that of the classical hero, in that her maturation, tied to her access to her own profound power, occurs through a heightened, intensified distortion of her relationship to the temporal. As we saw in *Carrie*, in a roughly two-week period Carrie undergoes menarche—which she more traditionally would have experienced at a much earlier age—a symbolic marriage at the prom, a hideous symbolic passage into sexuality (being drenched in blood), and death, all in the span of a few days. The heroine of the slasher film undergoes a similarly rapid transformation, from adolescence to adulthood, through mayhem and death generally but specifically through a particularly and peculiarly gendered schema.

The slasher film, following *Psycho*, sets up a competitive contest between the queer male monster who fights for his right to mother and origins and a young woman whose survival depends on vanquishing and transcending the monster *and his desiring quest*. What is interesting is that her own longing for the mother is subsumed by the serial killer's much more ardent, overwhelming one; her survival hinges upon his extinction, usually achieved or greatly abetted by her hand. It is precisely this contest between male killer and female monster-slayer that needs a careful reexamination.

Genealogy of the Fury: Looking Back at *Flamingo Road*

As I argued in the early chapters, one of the most striking figures in the woman's film, released in its fusions with other genres, such as film noir

(*Possessed*) and the western (*The Furies*), is the Fury, as I call her, a phallic, violent woman who retaliates against or otherwise destroys those who have wronged her, usually males but not always. As I will elaborate later in this chapter, my reinterpretation of the vexatious Final Girl is that an aspect of her symbolic and cultural significance that has not, to my knowledge, been discussed is her function as restorer of sexual order: in killing off the monster, she is also killing off a figure whose aberrant sexuality has troubled the narrative. I would argue that the foundation for this hygienic program lies in the classical Hollywood Fury. I will use Michael Curtiz's noir-infused 1949 woman's film *Flamingo Road* as an example.

The Fury, usually an embattled figure, fights her way through narrative, challenged by unfavorable circumstances and opposition from other characters. Usually seeking erotic or material fulfillment of some kind, she soon finds her desire hindered by larger forces embodied by a particularly dislikable character, and when this happens to her she retaliates, often murderously. In *Flamingo Road*, the villain, Sheriff Titus Semple, played by Sydney Greenstreet, offers particularly and unremittingly fervent opposition to the heroine, Lane Bellamy, played by Joan Crawford. Lane, a dancer in a traveling carnival, is penniless and stranded at the start of the film in the southern town of Bolaton, covertly run by Semple, a corrupt political insider. He dominates his weak-willed protégé, Fielding ("Field") Carlisle (Zachary Scott, who played the heroine's morally dubious second husband, Monty Barragon, in Michael Curtiz's previous collaboration with Crawford, the great 1945 *Mildred Pierce*), shaping and driving Field's political career. When Lane and Field develop a romantic relationship, Semple becomes enraged and determines to run Lane out of town. He makes sure that she is fired from the waitressing job Field secured for her, and that she is unable to find another job. He even rigs it so she is arrested for solicitation. After her incarceration, Lane manages to procure a position as a "hostess" (shades of the 1937 *Marked Woman*) at *Lutie Mae's* roadhouse. Lutie Mae (Gladys George), though wary of her "moodiness," decides to give Lane a chance, even defying Semple's advice that Lutie Mae fire her. At the roadhouse, Lane meets Dan Reynolds (David Brian, who supports Bette Davis in the 1949 *Beyond the Forest* as well), a key figure in the "state political machine." They marry and move to a home on Flamingo Road, the town's social pinnacle, as the opening narration from Crawford informs us ("There is a Flamingo Road in every town . . ."). Their marriage is soon marked by scandal when a drunken Field visits Lane at home one evening and shoots himself. Semple has decided to destroy Dan Reynolds's career, and Lane along with him, at last. In a superlative showdown at Lutie Mae's at the climax, Lane threatens Semple with a gun; they struggle, and she ends up shooting him dead. The film ends with reconciliation between Lane and Dan and what is more than likely her release, once again, from prison.

This major woman's film deserves a more extended treatment than I can provide here or than has yet been provided in criticism. (It's an astonishingly overlooked film.) For my purposes, I want to focus on the struggle between Lane and Semple, which results in Lane's transformation on several levels: from carnival dancer to prosperous married wife on Flamingo Road, and from victimized woman to Fury. Quite analogous to *The Silence of the Lambs*, in which there are four scenes between Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster), the FBI-trainee heroine, and Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins), the serial killer-psychiatrist, there are four major scenes between Crawford's Lane and Greenstreet's Semple. (There are two additional scenes, the one in which Semple notices Lane is working at Lutie Mae's and tries to get her fired there as well, and a scene in which Semple visits the Reynolds's Flamingo Road house and has a brief, though potent, exchange with Lane: "I've tried to figure out if you're very smart or very dumb," he tells her. "Someday, Sheriff, you just may find out," she tautly replies. He does.) Lecter, on balance, is someone who *aids* Clarice's maturation, acting as parodistic but insightful Freud to her modern-day Dora. The scenes between Clarice and Lecter are key to Clarice's development into a "successful" heroine and into a Fury: she becomes an FBI agent and the destroyer of Jame Gumb, just as Lane becomes a Flamingo Road housewife and the Fury who enacts retributive justice on Semple. In certain ways, Semple, though actively devoted to undermining and then to "crucifying" Lane, serves as her Lecter-like mentor as well, teaching her, as Lecter does Clarice, about the full extent of her ambitions and how to realize them. Structurally, the films have much in common: both *Silence* and *Flamingo Road* climactically conclude with a showdown between heroine and monster.

The monster in *Silence* is bifurcated into the roles of Lecter and Jame Gumb; Lecter emerges as a supersign of evil in addition to being Sibyl-like in his acuity, whereas Gumb, figured as lower working class (much like the heroine), fuses brutality with intense gender ambiguation while seeming always like a social castaway in a lonely, untraveled section of rural America. There is a very strong case to be made for Lecter as the far queerer character than Gumb; Gumb, though apprehended as a gay character and therefore (unfairly in my view) as a pernicious homophobic caricature over the years, is more notable for his gendered incoherence than any specific signals about his sexuality. In *Flamingo Road*, I would argue, the characters of Semple and Field parallel Lecter and Gumb in several fascinating ways: both Semple and Lecter are played by British actors (the English Greenstreet, the Welsh Hopkins) who signal high culture to an American moviegoing audience, on whatever level. Both characters are shown to be crucial to the heroine's maturation. Fundamentally outsider figures, they are also males in positions of institutionalized power (the law, psychiatry) who

hideously abuse their power. And as I will develop later in this chapter, both are figured as versions of the male mother.

Field and Gumb have an important similarity: gender ambiguity. As played so hauntingly by Ted Levine, Gumb's cross-dressing, desire to make a "woman suit" out of the flesh of actual women, hatred of his own genitalia, and other touches make him a gender-bending figure, especially when these touches are tied to his smooth, sleek musculature and the motifs of militarism and fascism associated with him (the mise-en-scène of Gumb's lair includes an army helmet, an American flag, and a poster with a swastika). Field, as played by Zachary Scott in *Flamingo Road*, is, for a male character in a classical Hollywood film who is presented as the heroine's chief romantic interest, surprisingly limp, weak-willed, and indecisive, dominated by not only Semple but also Field's icy, *Flamingo Road*-born wife. (The film's cold attitude toward institutionalized heterosexuality comes through most sharply in the depiction of this opportunistic and wholly loveless marriage, with the well-born trophy wife treated as a controlling cipher.) In conventional terms, he is the feminized male, possessing little phallic authority, as opposed to Dan Reynolds, who violently shatters a bottle against a table to confirm his virile masculinity in his first scene. Effeminated males in both films, males without a firm grasp on their own masculinity, will be destroyed.

I have taken great pains elsewhere to offer a counterargument to the frequent charges of homophobia leveled against *Silence*, arguing that if it types Gumb as a sexual type at all, it is as a fetishist, not a homosexual. I also argued that, rather than being the "gay man," Gumb anticipated several key shifts in sexuality that would characterize the 1990s and have implications well into the twenty-first century, in particular the rise of "queer" sexuality, which exceeds the category of and cannot be reduced to homosexuality, and transgendered sexualities (though in this regard the film is inescapably phobic). One of the motivations for my defense of this film—which I view not only as a great film but also as a much more challenging one about queer identity than has been commonly allowed, and also, less controversially, a feminist film—is my love for it, despite its often grisly content, a love that proceeds from my identification with its heroine, Clarice Starling, so exquisitely played by Jodie Foster.

Jodie Foster is an actress I grew up watching and with whom I have always identified. Her loneliness and resourcefulness in the classic B film *The Little Girl Who Lives Down the Lane* (1976) achingly evoke adolescent anomie and allegorizes queer experience. Seeing her come into her own as a film actress in *Silence* was a galvanizing experience. My chief point of affiliation with her character and with the film, however, is their ties to the woman's film, a genre that has always spoken very deeply to me as a gay man and a lover of strong women characters. I have yet to read a treatment of *The Silence of the Lambs*

that has explored gay male identification with the heroine rather than the Jame Gumb character, the former being, I would argue, a much likelier affiliation than the latter. Debates over the film, whatever value they have, reflect the rise and the inculcation of identity politics, one of the implications of which is that we, as viewers, strictly see ourselves on the screen in terms of literal, intended, direct, explicit representation, and that identification with screen characters strictly occurs on the level of such unambiguous representation. Women will identify with women, blacks with blacks, gays with gays, males with males, and so on and so forth—or so goes conventional thinking. The “positive images” approach to representation—that all underrepresented groups must be depicted in an affirming light—flows from this literal-minded model and has had, in my view, extremely constrictive consequences for queer and other alternative interpretations of popular culture.⁷

My intention here is not to delve into the highly contested issue of cinematic identification but rather to add something to the readings—which both disputes and enlarges them—of *The Silence of the Lambs* that have solidified a view of the film as homophobic. While a much more complex film than the term “homophobic” suggests, the phobic aspects of the film and the difficulties they continue to present stem from a much larger problem than the depiction of the Jame Gumb character: they stem from cinematic femininity itself. *Silence* is one film in a larger group of films in which the heroine achieves her goals and comes into her own by destroying a nonnormative male, nonnormative in that his gendered identity is shown to be troubled and troubling. To make this clearer, we can profitably return to *Flamingo Road*, in several ways an important template for *Silence*.

The enmity that the heroine of *Flamingo Road*, Lane Bellamy, feels toward the villain develops almost instantaneously. With good reason—especially as Greenstreet acidly plays him, Semple is an appallingly cruel, vindictive character. Nevertheless, for a character that, as written and as Crawford plays her, is notably demure and polite and polished, especially in contrast to her initial profession of carnival dancer, Lane is surprisingly venomous toward Semple from their first encounter forward. She never uses conventional feminine wiles to cajole him into sympathy; she never tries to appeal to his better nature, if it exists at all; she never tells him about her suffering or softens her demeanor toward him to gain his sympathy. In short, she never attempts to appease him in the feminine manner familiar to us from countless Hollywood films.

That the villain of this film is so resolutely depicted as a nonnormative male, and on so many distinct levels, and that this deviation from not just male but even human norms is a key component of the heroine’s contempt for and opposition toward him, is suggestive. Field takes Lane, whom he has rescued from a night of being stranded after the carnival is forced to leave, out to dinner at the

diner where he also gets her a job. As Lane and Field leave, Lane has her first meeting with Semple, who has been observing the couple having their meal. Semple makes it quite clear to both that he disapproves of their new association. Curtiz, an elusive director whose sensibility comes through in his brilliantly articulated visual designs, makes a visual statement about Semple's attitude toward the couple: we observe him, from the back, and seated at a table alone, observing them as they eat, drink, laugh, and confide. Semple appears to be as fascinated by as he is opposed to the interaction of this heterosexual couple: perhaps he is so hostile toward them, Lane especially, *because* they fascinate him.

In a huff after this initial encounter, Lane asks Field, "Was that fat man trying to tell me to get out of town?" adding, "He gives me the creeps. Our sideshows had better-looking people than him." This dialog is telling—Lane implicitly positions *herself* as normative, and from this position regards Semple as a creature beneath not only conventional aesthetic standards but even those of the sideshow. As the couple leaves the diner, Curtiz gives us a close-up of Semple from a higher angle than usual, emphasizing his jowliness and his vacant yet menacing expression. His portliness signals his depravity. Semple is also immediately associated with an activity that symbolizes his odd gendered identity: milk drinking, in contrast to the alcohol consumed by the political insiders at Lutie Mae's and in increasing amounts by the eventually alcoholic, debilitated Field. As we discussed in the previous chapter, such signifiers connote queer masculinity and gender-bending figures. The film suggests that Semple's evil manifests itself somatically and behaviorally. Moreover, his vast girth, physical ugliness, and childlike penchant for milk drinking all signify his estrangement from conventional codes of masculinity and add up to a characterization of him as some kind of monstrous, wizened infant. Later scenes reinforce the sense of Lane's contempt for Semple as nonhuman. After she has married Reynolds and through this union gained access to Flamingo Road wealth and status, Lane and Semple, encountered in a swanky restaurant, have a telling exchange:

SEMPLER: Now me, I never forget anything.

LANE: You know sheriff; we had an elephant in our carnival with a memory like that. He went after a keeper that he'd held a grudge against for almost 15 years. He had to be shot. You just wouldn't believe how much trouble it is to dispose of a dead elephant.

In the two most significant confrontations between Lane and Semple—when she storms over to his house to give him hell for having gotten her fired from her diner job, and the last, climactic one in which she corners him at Lutie Mae's—Lane is presented as striding toward the seated, milk-imbibing Semple from a distance, charging through streets to get to his house in the first,

mounting a flight of stairs before standing in the doorway of the Lutie Mae backroom in the latter. Erect, enflamed, she looms above him as he sits on his porch, snarling well-earned invective at him in their first confrontation; erect, stock still, in a black dress garlanded with an expertly positioned fur, she stands in the doorway in their final confrontation. Her face obscured, a dark blank, she is a black widow, a harbinger of death, a final judgment. The “fat man,” in contrast, decadently drinks milk and sits in a childlike, inferior position to her increasingly violent, retributive Death-Mother.

Diana Fuss argues that *The Silence of the Lambs* homophobically associates Jame Gumb with the oral stage, drawing on Freud’s homophobic paradigms of male homosexual psychosexual development.⁸ While I believe *Silence* much more complexly thematizes orality than Fuss allows, as does Freud, it is nevertheless inescapably true that between *Flamingo Road* and *Silence* a portrait of gender-ambiguous manhood emerges from tropes of decadent orality. In the former film, Lane’s acquisition of the full range of adult, social, and class power reaches its apotheosis in her destruction of Semple, figured as a kind of obscene father—there is a scene in which he slaps around the effeminate Field as the cruel, obese sheriff condemns his wayward protégé for being unable to defend himself and fight back against even an old man—but more disturbingly as a monstrous child still locked in the oral phase and, therefore, in the embrace of the preoedipal mother. As such, the film figures Lane as resolutely *unnurturing*, in hateful opposition to her unwanted, abhorred, endlessly demanding, and taxing monster son. Through its depiction of Semple, the film gives a whole new meaning to Freud’s humorous, telling phrase “His Majesty, the Baby,” especially when we consider the influence and pernicious misuse of Freud’s theory of male homosexuality in American psychiatry and culture generally. In symbolic terms, if Semple is the male homosexual child, Lane is the mother who destroys—the only one who can destroy—her depraved son.

The visually spellbinding climax takes all of these motifs to a dizzyingly suggestive level. In Lacanian terms now quite familiar, the imaginary is the child’s passage from the preoedipal world of the mother to the father’s Symbolic one of language and law, which transforms the child into a subject who bears the Name of the Father and who is subjected to his Law. During the mirror stage, a key stage in this passage, the child perceives an image of itself that is coherent, bounded, unified, but this image is a reflection and therefore an illusion of wholeness. Subjectivity derives, therefore, from identification with an illusion, a misrecognition of the self as whole and coherent, a process that provokes aggressivity and, potentially, suicidal despair. It is significant that Semple struggles with Lane before a mirror, given that the image of her from a distance, in the doorway, a faceless and frightening dark figure, figures her as the Death-Mother of Freud’s “Three Caskets” essay. Threatening to destroy him when

he vows to “crucify” both Reynolds and Lane, Lane pulls a gun on Semple; he duplicitously pretends to make a call that will set matters right but then hurls the telephone at her, knocking the gun out of her hand and shattering the long mirror on the opposite wall. The flung phone makes a metaphorical mockery of his attempts to silence her woman’s voice throughout the film. The two opponents struggle, their struggle captured within the distorted image of the mirror’s shards, and during the struggle Semple, having availed himself of Lane’s gun, fires directly *into* the mirror, further shattering it. In one decisive insert shot, Lane’s hand, seizing the gun, fires a bullet directly into Semple’s chest. Her reaction is anguished, horrified, as he sinks to the ground dead.

The image of Semple dead on the ground truly is an *image*: the scene cuts to Reynolds, intervening on Lane’s behalf, in an office in the prison where Lane has now once again been jailed, looking at a photograph of Semple lying dead on the ground. In death, he passes from body to image, a reified version of himself that confirms his status throughout as, on some level, always already dead, vanquished. Significantly, it is in the realm of the symbolic mother, Lutie Mae, who takes Lane in and gives her a job despite Semple’s stratagems, and who “holds” Semple there for Lane to find him, that the two resolve their conflicts, a resolution that can only be Semple’s death at Lane’s hands. Semple’s passage has not been from the realm of the preoedipal mother’s into the father’s, but a passage into the Death-Mother’s domain, a mirror-stage scene in which he identifies not with his own illusory image but with his thralldom to the maternal superego, his inescapable submission to the mother’s punitive, annihilating wrath. In an earlier scene, Lane slaps Semple twice across the face, as if he were an unruly child; in the climax, she kills him. If the mother is repressed in the woman’s film, she nevertheless reappears in symbolic maternal gestures of rage and violence, substituting murder for nurture.

Linda Williams, in her influential article “When the Woman Looks,” discusses the woman’s relationship to the monster in the classic horror film:

There is a sense in which the woman’s look at the monster is more than simply a punishment for looking or a narcissistic fascination with the distortion of her own image in the mirror that patriarchy holds up to her; it is also a recognition of their own similar status as potent threats to a vulnerable male power. This would help to explain the often vindictive destruction of the monster in the horror film and the fact that this destruction generates the frequent sympathy of the women characters, who seem to sense the extent to which the monster’s death is an exorcism of the power of their own sexuality.⁹

While the woman’s sorrowful apprehension of the significance of the monster’s death continues to inform works of modern horror (as I discuss later in this chapter), and while *Flamingo Road* is not a horror film, it is nevertheless true

that sorrowful sympathy is not the only mode with which the heroine confronts the destruction of the monster, and it is also the case that dark-themed, noirish woman's films like *Flamingo Road* intersect with the classic horror film as they anticipate its modern version. The woman here does not look on the monstrous male with sympathy but with contempt; far from seeing him as her double, a fellow victim of patriarchal oppression, she views him as the *source* of oppression and also as monstrous precisely because he is nonnormative, not even fully human. The implication is that, at times, far from being the victim, the woman functions as the purgative force *of* patriarchal oppression. This is sexual hegemony at work, the victims of patriarchal oppression pitted against each *other*; yet it is also undeniably true that woman is deployed as the scourge of male sexual deviance in ways that then affirm her secure place within the patriarchal order, which elevation seems to follow only from her destruction of the queer male.

As I will discuss further in this chapter, *Flamingo Road's* staging of a confrontation between the heroine and the nonnormative male has deep implications for modern horror works like *The Silence of the Lambs*, as do films like Hitchcock's thriller *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943). The persephonal aspects of the woman's film take on an entirely new dimension in modern horror, in which the struggle transforms, often, into one in which the heroine contends not with Mother but with the Mother-identified male, typed as queer. The roots of this modern horror scenario lie in the woman's film, since a significant number of films of this genre themselves stage the same conflict. Part of the difficulty here, then, especially for a reading of gay male identification with the heroines of both genres, is that the heroine's maturation and triumph come at the expense of a queer masculinity figured as monstrous. What feminist film theorists, in particular, have overlooked in treatments of gender in the horror film are the genre's implicit messages about normative femininity's investment in the destruction of the queer monster and in the preservation and restoration of the sexual status quo.

To a certain extent, only counterintuitive readings of these films will illuminate the gendered and sexual struggle between monster and heroine; after all, who would not root for driven Joan Crawford against odious Sydney Greenstreet; for Clarice Starling, feminist hero, against Jame Gumb, serial killer of women; or the Final Girl against Jason Voorhees, Michael, Leatherface, and their grisly ilk in the slasher genre? I argue that one of the results of this thematic is the split in identificatory practice they produce in the gay male viewer, among others, left to identify with a character who, a Death-Mother for queers, signifies his own destruction.

The Monster or the Final Girl?

Carol J. Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* remains a theoretical touchstone for the horror film genre.¹⁰ Her theory of the "Final Girl" has been particularly influential; as Clover theorizes it, the Final Girl—the heroine who escapes the mass killings of the horror-film monster, confronts him at the climax, and remains alive at the end of the film, having either eluded or annihilated him—is an identificatory figure for the masochistic male spectator, who can both experience her suffering and disavow any connection to it.¹¹ In this chapter, I offer a queer theory reading of the horror film that both intersects with and clashes against Clover's feminist argument, provoking broader questions of gender, identification, and theoretical practice. Specifically, I am interested in what a possible "clash" between these approaches reveals not only about the expectations of divergent audiences but also about the goals and sensibilities of related and also distinct methodologies. How can a positively valued heterosexual female figure (the Final Girl) also be, as I will argue, a prohibitive, disciplinary figure from a queer-theory perspective? The goal of this chapter will be to provide some speculative answers to this question while examining the transformation of the woman's film into modern horror.

Surprisingly enough, given the popularity of the figure, the Final Girl is not actually the centerpiece of Clover's argument. Clover's main focus and the chief subject of her critique is the unacknowledgeable, disavowed masochism of the horror male viewer, whom she exclusively figures as white, male, and heterosexual. The influence of Clover's theory, however, has led to a positive valuation of the Final Girl as a kind of feminist icon. In the horror film, the Final Girl battles against some kind of monstrous male whose monstrosity lies not in his sexual threat to the heroine—despite the ever-intensifying and overwhelming threat of physical violence—but in his lack of a functional sexuality of any kind, as Clover herself argues. It is precisely in the heroine's climactic confrontation with a sexually nonnormative male, to take Clover's argument to its logical conclusion, that feminist and queer issues intersect and diverge in provocative ways. The sexually dysfunctional—or perhaps more properly, sexually blank—male monster, in stark contrast to the scores of characters who avidly indulge in sexual relations before their untimely, gruesome deaths at the monster's hands, is in every sense of the word a queer figure, opposed to structures of normativity, especially heterosexual presumption. Both the Final Girl and the kind of male she faces off against at the climax engage in a struggle over modes of gendered and sexual power and identity as much as life and death.

A struggle between a woman and some kind of sexually troubled, enigmatic, or ambiguous male is waged in numerous genres other than the horror film, such as the classical Hollywood woman's film, the science-fiction film, the

thriller, the revenge fantasy, and also certain forms of the comedy, especially the screwball. In *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), for instance, Cary Grant's paleontologist is a sexless sobersides awakened into heterosexual desire as well as his own active masculinity by Katharine Hepburn's anarchic, frenetic Susan Vance, who restores sexual order—the production of proper heterosexual passion—as she chaotically disrupts narrative. If Grant, in *her* nightgown, exclaims, as he does, “I just went gay all of a sudden,” and spends the bulk of his screen time eluding Hepburn's charms, he will by the end of the film be hopelessly infatuated with the screwball heroine, whose madcap mayhem promises, once the sexless male participates in it, romantic fulfillment.¹² The particular female figure that emerges throughout these genres is an *action heroine*, the female who *takes action*. In the horror film, the female takes action in order to destroy a diabolical male opponent. For Clover, the Final Girl's battle against the monster signifies her larger battle against masculine power. Yet, as I will show, in the horror film these battles are also very much in *service* to masculine power and the social system that undergirds it. The chief tension that emerges, then, for the queer viewer is one of identification: are we the Final Girl or the monster she destroys?

The Final Girl is, as I interpret her, Freud's figure of the phallic girl in its current cast, who knows in a flash that she wants the penis for herself. In the avidity of her desire, she far surpasses that of the horror-movie monster, who either wants to *lose* his penis (Jame Gumb) or employs a range of substitute versions of it in a mockery of traditional heterosexual male identity (the slasher killer). Above all else, as Clover persuasively shows, the horror male monster is essentially nonphallic in terms of his own sexual identity, no matter how many knives, axes, or chainsaws he wields. Clover's book sets out to problematize the issue of sexism, charges of which were at the core of attacks against the horror genre, especially the slasher film, in the 1980s. If these films are as misogynistic as critics, especially feminist critics, say they are, why is it that a woman always emerges as the victorious vanquisher of the monster by the end (or at least is able to elude him)? She discusses the opprobrium that rape-revenge films such as *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978) have generated from male critics in particular as much more revealing of male critical bias than of something inherently offensive within the film. (In Zarchi's film, a woman who has been raped and left for dead enacts revenge on her rapists, cutting off the penis of one of her attackers.) Clover's work simultaneously argues that the horror film gives vent to female rage against misogyny and that many of the killers in the horror genre—Leatherface, Jason, and others—are sexually nonnormative, indeed, nonfunctional. I believe a telling tension exists in her argument, one I wish to explore in this chapter. What Clover leaves unexplored is the woman's investment—or, better put, patriarchy's investment in the woman's apparent

investment—in vanquishing the monster, especially when this monster is so sexually nonnormative.

Fetishism: A Theory of the Action Heroine

Freud famously argued that fetishism is one of the major psychic strategies a male child can use to ward off two linked discoveries: that the mother, a supremely powerful being to the child, does not possess a penis; and that he can be castrated by the father just as she has been.¹³ A foot, a shoe, a nose, even the shine on the nose can be compensatory phallic zones of the woman's body; these components and attributes, fetishized as penis substitutes, restore phallic qualities to the castrated mother. Later, the same substitutes will be affixed to the bodies of women throughout the male's life, with the same goal of restoring the mother's phallus. Of chief interest to us here is that fetishism allows the male who opts for this particular strategy to ward off his fears of both the "castrated woman" and homosexuality.

Numerous responses to Freud's theory of fetishism, with its wide-ranging implications and uses, have been offered over the decades. For our present purposes, we can theorize that film (and television) representation continuously uses the fetishized woman as an attempt to ward off a universalized psychic trauma, the fear of castration. If the version of the powerful woman in film is constructed as a fetish, and if the screen may be seen, as it is in Apparatus Theory (Baudry, Metz, Wollen, Mulvey, Penley), as a fantasy illusion of oneness with the preoedipal mother, what is the significance of the Final Girl, whose climactic confrontation with the monster resolves narrative conflicts—through either her escape from or her destruction of him, feats unachieved by any other character?¹⁴ I argue that the Final Girl not only symbolically but also, to a certain extent, *literally* represents the phallic mother, the unity of femininity and masculinity; in other words, precisely that original preoedipal mother who existed *before* the intense need for the fetish, which wards off the loss of this phallic mother, arose.¹⁵ Brandishing a knife or a chainsaw; adorned with huge, protuberant guns slung across her shoulder; able to douse the monster with flammable fluids and incinerate him alive; or armed with spiky wit that deflates his prodigious ego, the action heroine wields the phallus with aplomb.

For Clover, this heroine is, as we have noted, a masochistic fantasy. The Final Girl allows the male spectator to experience vicariously all manner of torment on both an emotional and a visceral level; she is also the scapegoat for his conflictual responses to his own suffering. He identifies with her but only insofar as he can keep this identification at bay, safely masked by the veil of gendered difference. Clover notes that in Freud "feminine masochism" refers "not to masochism in women, but to the essence of masochistic perversion in

men, and it is in this sense that I use the term here.”¹⁶ Noting that horror films bear striking similarities to the masochistic fantasies collected in classic psychoanalytic theory, Clover suggests, “The masochistic aesthetic is and always has been the dominant one in horror cinema.”¹⁷ Clover works hard to “unsilence” male masochism, seeing it as central to the equally silenced male-with-female-identification central to horror-film viewing.¹⁸

Gilles Deleuze has argued that fetishism is a subspecies of masochism; to theorize the action heroine as fetish object, in Deleuzian terms, would be another way of arguing along the same lines as Clover.¹⁹ Yet the point I am making here, through a revised, queer theory updating of Freud, is that the action heroine is not primarily a masochistic fantasy but rather a compensatory figure for the male spectator’s fear of loss of phallic mastery. She is not, in other words, a transvestic stand-in for the male viewer, whose own unacknowledged masochism in the face of horror-movie assault finds vent in the Final Girl’s battle against the monster, and who can simultaneously identify with her insofar as she releases and embodies his own masochism and disavow cross-gendered identification. Rather, she is a narcissistic-fetishistic fantasy, a tremendously *reassuring* figure that allows the spectator to reinhabit the pleasurable plenitude of the preoedipal, phallic mother and of primary narcissism; the action heroine’s fullness, connoted by her array of fetishistic properties that range from weapons to wit, and her determination to defeat the monster and therefore symbolically to save the spectator who identifies with her, signal her associations with the phallic mother, whose power and single-minded devotion to the child inhabit a fantasy temporal space that exists before the onslaught of the Oedipus complex and its terrors of castration and other forms of loss, chief among them the bond between mother and child.

As Louise Kaplan points out in her review of Freud’s theory of fetishism, the creation of a fetish is crucial to the preservation of the boy’s narcissistic investment in his own endangered sexual organ. The boy “retains his belief that the woman has a penis by creating a substitute for that missing organ.”²⁰ Kaplan observes that most “fetish objects are adopted to allow a man to express his dangerous and shameful wishes to be female and yet to remain male . . . the fetishist unconsciously (or consciously) imagines he is a woman, but a woman with a penis.”²¹ The action heroine allows the viewer—if we stick with Clover, the male spectator—to imagine a restored connection to the phallic mother, as well as his narcissistic investment in both his own penis and his mother’s phallus. A fetishistic icon, the action heroine wields Mother’s might and fulfills male wishes. The question is, then, why is it so often the queer monster that she must annihilate?²²

***The Silence of the Lambs* Revisited: The Feminist-Queer Split**

As I suggested earlier, Jonathan Demme's 1991 film *The Silence of the Lambs* emerged at a crucial juncture in the development of gay life in America, the period when "gay" was transforming into "queer."²³ This film synthesizes key problems in the action-heroine genre, namely the climactic annihilation of the queer male monster, here the serial killer Jame Gumb (Ted Levine), who labors to create a "woman suit" out of the bodies of actual women. The most difficult issue in *Silence* remains its prophetic but phobic representation of the transgendered body—prophetic in that the film anticipated the increasing visibility of transgendered identities, phobic in that it represents the killer's efforts to transform his body into something different as inextricably linked to his monstrosity. If, by and large, the woman's transformation is positively viewed in the woman's film, and not entirely negatively viewed in the horror film, the male monster's desire to transform in *Silence* is depicted in unremittingly negative terms. More disturbing still, what the film deploys to eradicate this queer-transgendered threat is a heroine who is strongly coded as lesbian, Jodie Foster's FBI-agent-trainee Clarice Starling.²⁴ (I return to the figure of the lesbian heroine later in this chapter.)

An aspect of the film that has not been explored, however, is its relevance to issues of queer identification—not just with the "gay" serial killers Hannibal Lecter and Jame Gumb but with the female star protagonist. In terms of identification, the film produces a fundamentally split queer viewer. To recapitulate a major theoretical proposition of this book, one way to understand films such as *The Silence of the Lambs* is to interpret them as "concealed" versions of the woman's film.²⁵ As do the *Alien* films, in which the heroine Lieutenant Ellen Ripley goes through one metamorphosis after another, *Silence* fuses melodrama with other genres, the thriller and the horror film.²⁶ It is above all an action-heroine film, if we define this last genre as one in which women gain access, however fleetingly or problematically, to male phallic agency, figured by the gun (or other object of power) or a more abstract figure, such as social advancement and wealth.²⁷ Just as the woman's film genre has spoken to and for gay men as well as for women, the action-heroine genre can be empowering for queer viewers, an allegory for our own struggles and hopes as well as a site of cathartic pleasures in which we can share. Along with that affinity, however, comes complicity, a participation in the heroine's purgative retaliation against unruly forces figured as violations of normative gender and sexual codes. The potentialities of the action-heroine genre make its ideological lapses all the more piercing; but without a consideration of the intricate levels of identification enabled by a film like *The Silence of the Lambs*, precisely what is radical and what is phobic in the film will be obscured.

Some further personal comments are in order here. When the controversies over the film began to rage at its initial release, I experienced feelings of alienation and bewilderment (I was a college student at the time). As I watched gay activists picket the film and out its star, Jodie Foster, as “Absolutely Queer,” I felt a sense of betrayal; this female bildungsroman had touched as well as terrified me, recalling the classical Hollywood woman’s films about a woman’s development that I had always found so resonant, such as *Alice Adams* (1935), *Now, Voyager* (1942), *The Heiress* (1949), and Hitchcock thriller melodramas such as *Spellbound* (1945) and *Notorious* (1946). *Silence* was a film that meant so much to me largely because of my love for Clarice. (Gay activists have also ignored far more perniciously homophobic films, such as *The Birdcage* [1996].) As stated earlier, I have always experienced the woman’s film and other women’s narratives—ranging from classical Hollywood melodrama to horror to sci-fi to thrillers to numerous television genres such as the sci-fi and the detective show—as allegories for my own identity as a gay man and also as galvanizing sources of inspiration. Despite the deeply disturbing nature of *Silence*’s themes, I found Clarice’s story exceptionally powerful and affecting, and her odd, complex, frightening, and stimulating relationship with Lecter of great fascination. Having always received the greatest guidance and inspiration from contraband sources—pop culture, books on homosexuality I surreptitiously borrowed from the library²⁸—the secret thrill of the transgressive Clarice-Lecter relationship spoke to certain aspects of my own experience, the clandestine nature of gay knowledge in a stifling culture of surveillance. Moreover, I appreciated *Silence* as a deeply complex and sophisticated work of the cinema, suffused with the extraordinary tenderness of Foster’s performance and Demme’s direction of it. In none of the numerous heated debates of the time, particularly between feminist and queer critics, did the issue of gay male identification with the heroine, rather than the purported gay man (gay men, if you include Anthony Hopkins’s indelible Dr. Lecter), make much of an appearance.²⁹

In his *Melancholia and Moralism*, Douglas Crimp explores these ideological conflicts. The film is “perhaps feminist, though insufficiently, and certainly homophobic, quite sufficiently. Acknowledging these two different positions should not be impossible . . . [or] mutually exclusive.”³⁰ For Crimp, the film falters in its failure to extend its antipatriarchal politics to its representation of Jame Gumb, presented as a “fag basher” in the Thomas Harris novel, a detail left out of the film. Crimp notes that the tension in the climax—in which Clarice, in total darkness, is hunted by Gumb in his warrenlike basement as he observes her through night-vision goggles—“is broken, not by Clarice’s gunshots, but by an often-remarked male spectator’s shout in the dark, ‘Shoot the fucking faggot!’ Homophobia breaks the power of the cinema, ‘proper’ interpretation fails, and only then is Clarice restored to agency.”³¹

In my view, neither Demme nor his film should be held responsible for that oft-cited homophobic outburst. I would also argue that the film's representation of Jame Gumb is much more complex than the term "homosexual" suggests. Indeed, to repeat earlier points, in his blur of aspects of hetero-masculinity, American militarism, fascism, numerous serial-killer profiles, and rock-grunge-metal-goth-punk attributes, and in the ways in which Gumb suggests the fetishist as well as the transsexual and the homosexual, the character is a poignant, terrifying collage of masculine styles, who should be read as a critique of normative American masculinity and its incommensurate, maddeningly unachievable demands. Moreover, part of the very impasse that exists in making proper sense of a film like *Silence* is the rigid split between gay monster and feminist hero frequently maintained in critical writing on the film.

Seeing the film today, it remains extremely important to me, my love for its heroine undiminished. Nevertheless, this love *is* now colored by a deepened awareness of the ambivalent nature of her role. This is an ambivalence the film itself critiques, as the final image of Clarice, lost, disconnected, abandoned during her ominous phone call from the cannibal psychiatrist ("Dr. Lecter . . . Dr. Lecter . . ."), even after she has participated in a ceremony that has conferred her official, law-enforcing status as FBI agent upon her, evinces. Nevertheless, however ambivalently and complexly portrayed in the film, Clarice's function as the killer of the queer male—even if he is not the "homosexual" male, even if he is a critique of American masculinity, Gumb is irreducibly a queer figure—vexes.

The problem with *Silence's* representation of the queer male figure lies less in *Silence's* ever-debatable depiction of the queer serial killer than in the elaborate way it stages the female destruction of queer manhood. *Silence* synthesizes—even as it also critiques—a tradition of action heroines whose chief function is the routing out, discovery, and elimination of otherness, difference, and therefore a kind of queerness. Action-heroine films and television shows dazzlingly empower women but often at the cost of demonizing, pathologizing, and finally extirpating queer male figures. While these popular culture works also demonstrate the costs of this extirpation, they cannot conceal—indeed, at times, they openly flaunt—the evidence that the gains for the heroine often emerge from losses for queer masculinity.

These themes are not exclusive to the horror film, of course. One of my favorite films, Todd Haynes's beautiful pastiche-melodrama *Far from Heaven* (2002), a reimagining of German-director-turned Hollywood-melodramauteur Douglas Sirk's equally impressive 1955 *All that Heaven Allows*, gives us an extraordinarily sympathetic, likable, intelligent heroine whose marriage to a closeted gay man she must escape in order to find personal happiness. I empathize with her throughout the film; Julianne Moore's incandescent acting brings

me to tears with its grace. But on some level, the film, which uses a closeted gay man allegorically to represent what's wrong with American manhood, asks me on some level to identify against myself, to identify with the heroine who must on some level reject gay manhood to achieve her own identity. Her escape from him is what I root for, but, to root *for* her, am I on some level rooting against myself?³² That this film is made by a gay director only deepens the complexities. I would passionately defend this film to a detractor, but the issues it poses to me (and, I imagine, to other gay men) are not negligible. (Tom Ford's gorgeous and consistently misinterpreted period film *A Single Man* [2009] is a more determinedly queer film in comparison. Like the classical Hollywood directors, Ford knows that style is substance and gender's economy.)

Shadow and Silence

The Silence of the Lambs inherits a set of problems pertaining to sexuality in the genre film. If the film repurposes the heritage of the cruder slasher films that came before it, it also extends tensions in the classical Hollywood woman's film, as I attempted to demonstrate earlier in my comparison of the film and its gendered and sexual tensions to the noir melodrama *Flamingo Road*. A more direct influence and point of comparison is the Hitchcock thriller but the Hitchcock thriller understood as the woman's film, as I argue it should be. The most obvious intertext for *Silence* is Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 *Psycho*, as critics such as Lesley Brill have amply demonstrated (though he, characteristically, simultaneously avoids discussing issues of queer sexuality and makes a heated case against reading the heroine as lesbian).³³ A less obvious but equally resonant intertext for *The Silence of the Lambs* is Hitchcock's 1943 *Shadow of a Doubt*. In the way it stages the battle between singular womanhood and queer male sexuality, this may be the cinematic intertext with the most relevance to Demme's film.³⁴

Both films construct a dazzlingly interesting and sympathetic heroine with whom we maintain an intense intimacy. Charlie (Teresa Wright) is an intelligent, restless teenager who craves more excitement in her smalltime suburban California life. Her beloved Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotten) visits and brings excitement and fear with him: as Charlie discovers, he is a serial killer, perpetrator of the "Merry Widow" murders. There are few more felt moments in a Hitchcock film than the close-up he gives us of Charlie, standing on the front porch at night after she has confronted her uncle and told him to "take your chance" and get out of town. Alone with her terrible knowledge, she weeps as she listens to the merry family sounds of those enjoying themselves in blissful ignorance inside the house. Demme gives us an apposite view of Clarice in long shot, weeping after her first meeting with Lecter, during which she was spattered with semen by psychotic fellow institution-inmate "Multiple

Miggs.” This shot emphasizes her aloneness as it discreetly respects her private anguish. What links these heroines of the woman’s film and modern horror is their singular differentness—heightened by the secret knowledge each must bear—and intense aloneness.

Another link between *Shadow* and *Silence* is that each features a threateningly queer villain who is nonetheless highly attractive—debonair and handsome Uncle Charlie (walking down the midday street, Charlie’s young women friends openly look up and down his stylish dandy’s body, wresting away the male gaze for themselves: Uncle Charlie is a visual spectacle), fiendishly witty and uncannily insightful Hannibal Lecter—and toward whom the heroine feels mingled desire and disgust. Both films emphasize that the singularity of the heroine is perceived as threatening by those in her immediate realm and that she can only be understood and appreciated by the queer character. Both films posit as well that the heroine is the only one who can destroy the queer villain—as if her singular womanhood were her slayer’s birthright, a theme that will galvanize the much-beloved horror-comedy-action-heroine series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. *The Silence of the Lambs* ingeniously allows itself to eat its queer cake and have it too by bifurcating its queer character: while Clarice successfully destroys the grotesque Jame Gumb, Hannibal Lecter goes on living, his awesome power remaining almost omnipotent by the film’s end. Ultimately, like *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Shadow of a Doubt* is about the fulfillment of singular womanhood’s chief function—to slay the queer monster, quell queer energies.

Several elements in *Shadow* do complicate this schema. First, Charlie, as played so evocatively by Teresa Wright, is a defiant, courageous, singular heroine, much like Clarice. Redolent of its “Rosie the Riveter” World War II era, *Shadow of a Doubt*’s negotiations of female identity—the push-pull struggle between Charlie and her mother Emma (Patricia Collinge)—resonate with tensions in the national construction of femininity in a period in which it appeared women were gaining more social mobility. Charlie’s singularity makes her as much of a suburban anomaly as Uncle Charlie, although he is celebrated (courted by women’s social groups), she chided (by policemen, librarians, and other enforcers of the law). Whereas his goal is the destruction of “useless” and financially autonomous women, hers is to challenge complacency, especially that of the ineffectual male characters around her. In this regard, it is significant that she rails against her weak-willed father (Henry Travers) and his banally sinister friend Herb (Hume Cronyn), who always shows up at dinnertime to compare ever-grislier notes on the perfect murder. (Emma: “Dear, it’s your father’s way of relaxing.”)

As D. H. Lawrence famously put it in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, the essential American male character is “hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer.” And this is the crucial next line: “It has never yet melted.”³⁵ Uncle Charlie’s queer

manhood, as presented by the film, is merely a heightened version of the core misogyny of American masculine identity. His misogynistic tirades—the widows “stinking” of money, female economic and sexual agency as a site of disgust and horror—merely amplify the misogynistic messages of his own culture and, of course, ours as well. So when Charlie vanquishes him in a climax terrifyingly structured as an incestuous rape (“Not yet, let it get faster,” Uncle Charlie says with his hand over Charlie’s mouth as they watch the tracks whipping by from their position as strangers on a train), she annihilates his misogynistic as well as his queer energies. To the extent that the genre heroine’s destruction of the villain emerges as a victory for women, she is a radical figure. What becomes an increasingly urgent issue, however, from the melodrama to the modern horror film, is the relationship between feminist gain and queer loss.

Shadow of a Doubt is a tragedy, not in an Aristotelian but in a social sense, about the inability of transgressive female and queer energies to coalesce and correspond, to form a unified resistance to the normativity that threatens them both. It foregrounds Gramsci’s theory of hegemony: minority groups pitted against each other so that no unified opposition to structures of power can be organized. Its greatest poignancy turns into its greatest sting: the transformation of Charlie’s breathtakingly joyful “He heard me, he heard me” when she learns that Uncle Charlie is visiting, into “You’re hurting me, Uncle Charlie, *again*,” at the climax. The swirling, maddening, recurring expressionistic Merry Widow motif, rows of heterosexual couples dancing, would appear to be Hitchcock’s visual commentary on Uncle Charlie’s psychosexual obsessions. By the end, however, the motif reveals its symbolic import as something quite different: the reminder and reinforcement of an unceasingly repetitive and inescapable heterosexual normativity, precisely what Uncle Charlie has murderously defied and defiled. The motif makes a final eruption into the frame as Charlie kills Uncle Charlie while they grapple on the train—their murderous dance dissolves into the Merry Widow dance. Now, the motif signals the *restoration* of the normative order, suggesting that anticipating this event has been the motif’s chief function throughout. In killing off Uncle Charlie, Charlie kills off herself, as well as whatever radical potentialities she may have shared with her uncle. She joins normativity’s endless dance.

While there is no suggestion in *Silence* that Clarice is about to embark on a heterosexual romance, *Shadow* makes this possibility much more salient by having the last scene of the film occur between Charlie and the detective who has been courting her throughout the film while also investigating her uncle for his suspected crimes. Their discussion of Uncle Charlie’s mysterious evil occurs outside of a church, which suggests something like an impending marriage.

Indeed, *Silence* is an anomalous film in the horror-movie tradition in that it doesn’t end with a promise of heterosexual closure; instead, we see Hannibal

Lecter walking away to a limitless future of unbridled cannibalistic, perverse desire, while he leaves Clarice hanging, forever. The horror film generally posits that a bleak future is inescapable and that the killer will return.³⁶ Yet, at the same time, there is a strong tendency to suggest that some kind of heterosexual narrative closure has been effected by the transformation of the heroine into Final Girl, a process that holds truest in the slasher-film genre.

Slashers and Sexuality: The *Friday the 13th* Series

To return to the slasher film, the genre that is the meat and potatoes of Clover's study, though its sex-phobic central males would appear to possess more of the latter than the former, it behooves us to reconsider the exemplary slasher franchise, the *Friday the 13th* series. The first film in the series (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980) was a surprise hit that spawned more than a dozen films, apparently concluded with the 2002 *Jason X*, set in the science-fiction future, then subsequently merged with another horror franchise with *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003), and has now been rebooted in the 2009 *Friday the 13th*, directed by Marcus Nispel. These films most dutifully feature Clover's Final Girl; a fresh examination, however, reveals the function of the Final Girl to be much more complex than simply eluding or destroying the monster.

The monster of the series is Jason Voorhees, a mentally retarded and deformed boy who drowns in the 1950s while teenage camp counselors make love; returns to life as a grisly, undead, immortal specter in a hockey mask, wielding a machete; and proceeds to kill scores of mindlessly copulating teens, forever held responsible for his child self's demise. In the first film of the series, the killer is not Jason but his mother, who exacts revenge for his death; in the subsequent films, it is Jason himself.³⁷ One of the most significant aspects of the *Friday the 13th* series is its synthesis of *Psycho*-influenced mother-son issues in the horror genre. If we examine the second film in the series, *Friday the 13th Part Two* (1981), and the recent *Freddy vs. Jason*, a kind of summary of the genre, we can develop a theory of the Final Girl that expands Clover's insights to encompass a queer theory consideration of the mother-son bond and the Final Girl's relationship to it and to the killer's sexuality.

In the second *Friday the 13th* film, Camp Crystal Lake, where the boy Jason died and his mother wreaked murderous vengeance before being decapitated by the Final Girl in the first film, has been shut down for five years. Paul (John Furey), the leader of a new bevy of randy teen camp counselors, fails to pay heed to dire warnings from neighbors that Jason Voorhees still lives. One of the counselors, who appears to be involved with Paul though the relationship doesn't seem very settled, is Ginny (Amy Steel), a graduate student in child psychology. In a bar scene conversation among Ginny, Paul, and another counselor—held

while those who stayed behind to have sex are being efficiently dispatched by Jason (not yet in his hockey-mask phase, he wears an Elephant Man–like bag with cutout eyeholes here)—Ginny speculates about what Jason would be like today, had he survived his drowning. Despite her look and tone of somber concern, Ginny’s words strike somewhat different tones: “Would he be some retard?” This language jarringly contrasts with her budding child-psychologist profile; it recalls the heroine’s surprisingly hostile characterizations of the villain in *Flamingo Road*, associating Jason with nonnormative male identity. But in a later scene, Ginny demonstrates her expertise in matters of childhood psychosexual development.

Cut to the climax. All the counselors, including Paul, having been variously murdered save for her, Ginny races into the woods and discovers Jason’s lair—a dilapidated cabin. The impression made is that Jason is a kind of horror-movie Thoreau, who famously lived alone in the woods of Walden to get away from society. (Shades of queer icon Rock Hudson’s manly gardener in *All That Heaven Allows*, as well, almost as threatening in class terms to the middle-class heroine as the slasher monster.) In one candlelit room in the cabin, Jason maintains a shrine to his mother, whose retrieved, decapitated head (we learn that he had watched her being killed) stares blankly out from a leathery face still adorned by hair.

This image is highly significant—the mother occupies here what Hélène Cixous has theorized as the position of woman in culture: decapitated, denied both mind and voice.³⁸ She is the ghastliest imaginable version of the castrated mother, yet also uncannily potent and alive, impelling Jason to action. As she confronts Ginny and us with her simultaneously defeated and triumphant glare, she recalls Freud’s image of the Medusa’s Head, which combines both the fear of castration (decapitation) and the compensatory relief from it (the phallic, swirling snakes for hair).³⁹

When Jason enters his lair in search of Ginny, she resourcefully comes up with a plan that draws on her child-psychology training: she impersonates Mrs. Voorhees, putting on the dead woman’s old, foul, soiled, mannish sweater and pushing her hair back to resemble that on the mother’s head. Donning the mother’s apparel transforms Ginny, as a change of clothing or hairstyle always seems to do in movies, especially for women: she becomes Jason’s mother.

More evocative still, the effect of the thick workingman’s sweater and pushed-back hair on Ginny is to render her newly, strangely masculinized, an androgynous figure. When Jason comes into the room, Ginny, though terrified, speaks in a commanding voice, telling Jason to kneel before her to receive his reward for having so ably followed her murderous demands. As Ginny speaks, Jason believes he is really seeing his mother (to aid us visually and aurally, the film integrates shimmering images of Betsy Palmer, who played Mrs. Voorhees in

the first film, saying Ginny's words). The ruse almost works, but Ginny, about to rain down a Judith-like punishment on this would-be Holofernes's head, disrupts the illusion by inadvertently allowing Jason to see his *real* mother's head. Realizing that he is being deceived, Jason begins to attack Ginny. She is about to be killed when Paul—not dispatched by Jason, after all—staggers in and jumps on top of him. As they struggle, Ginny comes into her Final Girl own, picking up Jason's machete and stabbing him with it, in the same dramatic slow motion that was used when the Final Girl killed the mother in the first film.

While suggestive enough to consider on its own, this climactic moment is far from the last of the film. After Brian De Palma's fake-out last shot in *Carrie* (1976) of Carrie's bloody hand rising out of the grave to grab Sue Snell's, and the homage the first *Friday the 13th* pays to it (in its final moments, the seaweed-covered mutant boy Jason jumps out of the water to grab the Final Girl as she rocks melodically in her boat), we do expect a stability-shattering denouement in which the monster comes back to life. What is especially significant, however, is what occurs during the patch of film time *between* the climax and the denouement. After Ginny machetes Jason to his death, or so it seems, Paul and Ginny walk back to the camp. As they do so, Paul carries Ginny, first over a stream, then over the threshold into the counselor's house. With remarkable concision, the film evokes the iconography of courtship and marriage. Jason's death extends the Thoreauvian connotations of his solitary, simplified, agrarian existence to Paul, the man who saves the Final Girl so that she can then kill the monster. Paul also transforms, into a hunter who can pass from solitude to heterosexual intimacy, carrying his love over the stream (which connotes courage, strength, and gentlemanliness at once) and then, a symbolic husband, carrying his symbolic bride over the threshold of their new home, christened and purified through blood. Significantly, he tends to Ginny's bleeding wound as they both sit on a white bed, another image that evokes the iconography of marriage, the folkloric inspection of the bed for signs of properly virginal, now wifely blood after the first sexual intercourse between the newly married couple.⁴⁰

The Final Girl performs a hygienic function for the purposes of heterosexual union: marshalling the might of masculine strength and deploying it with female wrath, she excises the infectious agent of corruption from the shared body of the properly joined heterosexual couple. It is precisely in the killer's nonnormative sexuality—his obsession with mother rather than wife, his lack of any interest in heterosexual relations—that his corrupted nature and corrupting threat lie. The monster destroys, or attempts to destroy, all the signs of properly functioning heterosexuality: the scores of young heterosexual couples making love. The Final Girl, in destroying the monster, restores heterosexual order as she provides narrative closure. The two are far from unrelated. As Paul Morrison has argued, "Traditional narrative is both heterosexual and heterosexualizing,"

narrative ending once heterosexual love properly begins.⁴¹ Heterosexual union and its symbolic double, narrative closure, both emerge through the Final Girl's annihilation of the queer monster.

What then, are we to make of the denouement, in which Jason bursts through the window to grab Ginny, sitting on the bed and calling to the dog that has reappeared (which Jason seemed to kill but didn't, establishing that a moral code exists whereby he kills and spares life)? It would appear that the Final Girl's campaign to root out queer evil has failed and that the queer triumphs. While this may be true, from another perspective, it is precisely the inevitable denouement of the monster's return that seals the conservative compact between heroine and narrative. Bursting in through the window, shorn of the obscuring bag-mask he had worn throughout the film, his hair a wild, flowing Byronic tangle, Jason has transformed, from a disguised, freakish outcast who obstructs the heterosexual order to a Romantic image of the lover who captures his erotic quarry by moonlight, breaking into her bedroom via the window, defying all strictures against the possession of his beloved. Significantly, he no longer has a weapon of any kind, no visible extrusion of his phallic identity; what he now bears is the affect of feverish passion directed at the one woman who could stand up to him, a postmodern Elizabeth Bennett to his deranged Darcy. (In light of the recent popular-culture success of the reconceptualization of Elizabeth Bennett as a zombie-killing action heroine, the comparison may be only increasingly apt.⁴²)

The very same image occurs in the 2009 reboot, in which the adult Jason, seemingly dead and descending to the depths of Crystal Lake, rises up through the boardwalk to possess the girl who slew him, or seemed to do so. And so, at last, the film reveals the chief function of the Final Girl: she properly heterosexualizes not only the narrative but also the monster. That we can now see his face—admittedly hideous but also touchingly, vulnerably exposed—signifies his acquisition, at last, of an authentic personhood to be displayed to the world, a humanity that the Final Girl has bestowed upon him as well.

Tony Williams, in an essay critical of Clover's thesis, points out that Ginny in the second *Friday the 13th* is left catatonic at the end: "Ginny temporarily adopts Mrs. Voorhees' authoritarian role to survive. Although circumstances necessitate this, she clearly uses the enemy's strategy to become a phallic mother herself. This posture really questions the positive image of the Final Girl. As the final image shows, the mother's decapitated (but still powerful) head survives as an enshrined totem. Indeed, the latter film's Final Girl is actually carried away on a stretcher calling in vain for her boyfriend in a definitely nonindependent manner, certainly not victorious!"⁴³

Williams is a more responsible critic than Clover, and his considered film-by-film analysis of the horror genre has more value, in many ways, than her overly

homogenizing view at times. While I share Williams's frustrations with Clover, I would somewhat amend his interpretation as well. It is precisely in *assuming* the role of the phallic mother that Ginny is victorious, for in doing so she fulfills her corrective, reassuring horror-film function as phallic mother, restoring the mother-child bond and heterosexual narrative order at once. As Marcia Ian observes in her study of the cultural afterlife of Freud's phallic mother, this figure's appeal specifically lies in her extraordinary ability to *end ambivalence*.⁴⁴ If we understand that the Final Girl's function is a cathartic one for her as well as the audience, we can see a clear development at work in the film: the prevalent awkwardness of intelligent, quirky Ginny's relationship to blandly conventional Paul shifts into a much more stable and coherent rapport. Now a properly feminine subject of patriarchy, calling out loud and without end for her boyfriend, the odd, singular, independent heroine is purged of heterosexual ambivalence far more effectively than her would-be murder of the monster purged the film and its viewers of elicited feelings of fear and pity.

In much the same fashion, two decades later, the Final Girl of *Freddy vs. Jason* performs the same function. The premise of this exhilarating, and deliriously homoerotic, double-protagonist film (of which Žižek is also a fan) is that Freddy Krueger (Robert Englund) of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise, angry that no one remembers him anymore, has revived the dormant but immortal Jason Voorhees.⁴⁵ Jason can strike new fears in the hearts of the teen populace whose dreams Freddy can then invade. At the climax, the heroine, Lori (Monica Keener), and her boyfriend Will (Jason Ritter) bring a comatose Jason back to Camp Crystal Lake in an elaborate scheme to get both Freddy and Jason to annihilate each other; they set fire to propane tanks that engulf the boardwalk so iconic to *Friday the 13th*, hoping the monster killers will be destroyed in the blaze. But Freddy rises up from the lake, wielding Jason's signature machete. He is about to kill Lori and Will, but then Jason emerges from the water and impales Freddy with Freddy's own arm. Lori then picks up Jason's machete and decapitates Freddy with it; both Freddy and Jason tumble into the lake, swallowed up by the water. Lori and Will walk off together, the monstrous males apparently destroyed.

Considering Lori's acquisition of Jason's machete, which she wields and uses to decapitate Freddy, it is intriguing to link her as well to the biblical Judith, who decapitates Holofernes, a general sent by King Nebuchadnezzar on an errand to annihilate the Jews. The classic example of the annihilating woman, the figure of Judith has had a profound cultural afterlife in visual art and other forms of representation. (She is the subject not only of great male painters such as Caravaggio but also of great female painters such as Artemisia Gentileschi.) If a continuum exists between decapitating-castrating biblical female scourge and the Final Girl, it lies within each heroine's function as the annihilator of a threat

to her community; in Judith's case the Jewish community, in the Final Girl's the heterosexual social order generally.

I have likened the slasher monster to D. H. Lawrence's famous description of hard, isolate, stoic killer American manhood, and drawn a parallel between Jason, who lives in a forest hut, and classic American figures like both Thoreau in *Walden* and Natty Bumppo, who lives in the forest. In *The Deerslayer*, the last novel in James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Saga but the novel in which the hero of the series is at his youngest, the fallen woman Judith Hutter—an obvious Judith figure—gives Natty his famous rifle, Killdeer (it belonged to her now dead father, Thomas Hutter).⁴⁶ If Killdeer is the most blatant phallic symbol in American literature, it is interesting that Natty must be given it by a woman. Yet, despite his acquisition of phallic power, Natty continues to feel no sexual desire for Judith.

Richard Slotkin teases out the mythic implications of “divine king” Natty's being given Killdeer by Judith Hutter in *The Deerslayer*, treating Killdeer as Excalibur and Judith Hutter, associated with water and the sea, as the Lady of the Lake “who has given him his manly weapon.”⁴⁷ Lori, however, is neither the Judith of *The Deerslayer* nor the Lady of the Lake but rather the Judith of the biblical tradition, who destroys the threat to community. What *is* similar, however, in both the classic American and contemporary horror-movie traditions, is the figure of the sexually nonnormative male, such as Natty Bumppo or the real-life Thoreau, who does not act on or toward heterosexual love. In Cooper's novel, the Judith figure is rejected—Natty is too pious to accept a sexually promiscuous woman. In the horror film, however, it is the sexually indifferent male—the virginal Jason—who is repeatedly, ritualistically destroyed, and whose persistently, determinedly virginal nature is rendered monstrous. Moreover, he projects his monstrous virginity outward, as horrific, murderous, unstoppable violence, as endless retribution against the sexually *active*. If the Lady of the Lake gives the hero his sword, the Final Girl of Crystal Lake uses the monster's machete to destroy the monster. Yet here, as if to draw out the queer implications of slasher-movie monstrosity, she destroys not only the monster but also his homoerotically charged union with another monstrous male. As the two male monsters die in fire and water, a ritualistic blaze of cleansing reminiscent of Sodom and Gomorrah and tinged with apocalyptic wrath, the newly minted heterosexual couple, Lori and Will, walk off into safety and the normative future.

Ah, but here the denouement does have a more subversive edge. Jason rises up from the water, Freddy's head in his hand. Freddy's decapitated head then winks at the audience—a startling moment of monster *jouissance* with myriad implications, chief among them that these monsters are in on their own homoerotic joke. *Freddy vs. Jason* reflects the changing social climate of the

horror-movie franchises from which the film is spawned. If in the 1980s the Final Girl's function was both to restore heterosexual order and properly to heterosexualize the monstrous male, in the twenty-first century her role expands. Now, she not only ensures the continuation of the heterosexual line but also facilitates gay monster marriage, providing something for everyone.

The Finalizing Woman: Homosexual Narcissism versus Fetishism

Considering the implications of the Final Girl's destruction and normalization of the monstrous male, we can return to the psychoanalytic reading of the Final Girl as a fetishistic icon and to the question of the validity of Clover's reading of her relationship to male masochism. One of the essential problems in Clover's theory, her focus on the male spectator—white and heterosexual—greatly limits the range of spectatorial positions afforded by genre productions. Suggestive though her interpretive model remains, Clover's theory fails to account for the wide range of spectatorial positions engaged with by the genre—to begin with, female and queer viewers and viewers of color. To be fair to Clover, her chief effort at the time, and a valuable one, was to redress the common theoretical reading of the horror monster–male spectator relationship as one of sadistic complicity; by emphasizing masochism, Clover found a means of problematizing theoretical boilerplate and speaking more richly to the ideological instabilities of the genre. Clover also discussed queer desire in the horror genre eloquently, as in her discussion of the quite overlooked film *Witchboard* (1985). Just as Linda Williams's defense of pornography against hard-line feminist denunciations made the genre—and Williams insisted that pornography should be seen *as* a genre, much like the Hollywood musical—a legitimate topic of academic study, Clover's work rescued the horror genre from a similar feminist backlash, legitimating it as an academic subject.

Yet Clover's reading ultimately makes no less critical a case against horror than earlier feminist readings had. Her critique essentially focuses on the same figure, the white male heterosexual spectator, finding a different way of critiquing the same subject. Although she admirably incorporates antihomophobic views into her work, Clover ends up reifying horror as a genre world in which the battles waged are always battles between heterosexual men and women in patriarchy. Male masochism emerges as an alternative route to male power, Final Girlhood a savvy female negotiation of male rage and fears.

Many works defy Clover's Final Girl formula. As I argued in the previous chapter, the standoff between Ripley, holding the foundling girl Newt, and the Alien Queen at the climax of James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986), a film that fuses the horror, science-fiction, thriller, melodrama, and action genres, illuminates the complexity of the confrontation between woman and monster endemic to

the majority of horror movies. Newt is not merely a child Ripley can claim as her own, or the daughter actively saved by her, but a blank slate upon which the audience can project its desires no less serviceably than Ripley can. To stick to that mythic subject the white heterosexual male viewer, this image from *Aliens* has implications that exceed masochism. As Catherine Constable argues, the “presentation of Ripley and Newt as an image of generational continuity enables the pair to function as a trope for the entire human species.”⁴⁸ The Ripley-Newt bond allows the general audience to return to a scene of imagined love between mother and child in which the spectator is both mother *and* child, both protector and protected, desirer and the desired, a return to the plenitude of primary narcissism in which no distinction between the mother’s and the child’s body existed. This narcissistic relation, much more so than masochism, speaks to the diversity of the viewing audience and also illuminates the potential radicalism in films most often negatively assessed as reactionary, such as *Aliens*, whose heroine has been frequently read as a misogynistic and family values—era fantasy masquerading as a feminist icon. Such complications in representation also deeply problematize Barbara Creed’s theory that horror films enact and defend against the return to the archaic mother. If anything, the cultural work of horror films is to return the spectator to a longed-for union with the mother and to origins. The Final Girl simultaneously enables and disrupts this union.

The psychoanalytic paradigm of most help to us is, surprisingly, Freud’s theory of homosexual narcissism, in which the male wishes to love another male as his mother loved him.⁴⁹ As it has been broadly applied and used to discipline unruly sexualities, this theory has an enduringly controversial nature, and rightly so. As noted earlier, Diana Fuss uses it as a psychoanalytic stick with which to beat *The Silence of the Lambs*, arguing that the theory as well as the film reeks of homophobia. If the theory has been central to homophobia throughout the history of American psychiatry, it nevertheless also has a value, in that it suggests desire stems from the mother-child bond and that desire is an attempt to recreate the scene of *imagined* maternal desire. Homosexual desire is the double of fetishism, another, queerer way of preserving continuity between mother and child on a psychic and somatic level.

Directing their address to the white, male heterosexual viewer, making their chief psychic organization fetishistic, horror films also operate on a narcissistic level that incorporates both straight and queer viewers. Insofar as she is a fetish object, the Final Girl restores the phantasy illusion of oneness between the child and the all-powerful mother. Discussing the relationship between fetishism and narcissism in Freud, Teresa De Lauretis writes, “The loss of a narcissistically invested body-image” threatens “the ego with a loss of being and prompts the defense process of disavowal. For this reason, I propose, that threat is equivalent to the threat of castration in the male subject: both are narcissistic wounds that

threaten the ego—the respective body-egos—with a loss of being.”⁵⁰ Fetishism, then, restores to the male subject both his own bodily integrity and that of his mother. Along these lines, the Final Girl, wielding the killer’s own phallic weapon, restores the phallus as she reunites with the male spectator in a newly soldered psychic-bodily union. Like the Lady of the Lake, she gives him back his phallus and in so doing restores the phallus to her own body, helping the viewer to stave off his imminent castration terrors.

As I have been arguing, in order for this restorative process to work at all, the monster that is destroyed must be an enemy of the heterosexual order, which the Final Girl, like a Golem working to protect her community, rises up to protect.⁵¹ As she destroys the queer monster and restores properly functioning heterosexuality, the Final Girl also enables narrative closure. And in the process of enacting this process, *the Girl becomes a Woman*, prepared for proper heterosexual, presumably marital fulfillment. As she transforms from girl to woman, genre transforms from horror to comedy, from nullity to fertility. Indeed, so regenerative are the effects of the Final Girl’s metamorphosis into woman that they facilitate the sexually dysfunctional killer’s transformation as well, into someone with something like a functional sexuality (the furious lover at the window, the queer monster couple). In that the female figure can produce all of these results—in narrative, in the killer, in the spectator, and in her own body—she is more properly termed the *Finalizing Woman*, rather than the Final Girl. She finalizes the warring struggles over body, text, and identity, drawing everything to a close and effecting the successful resolution of furious, competing desires.⁵²

For all these reasons, the monster’s relationship to mother is fascinatingly problematic, because it doubles as it distorts the relationship between the Finalizing Woman and the male spectator. The Finalizing Woman effects the split between queer male and mother so problematically central to modern horror. Jason wants to preserve the bond with his mother, whose enshrined head is his fetishistic totem; in killing, he joins in with her own campaign of retaliation on his behalf and does her imagined bidding. When Ginny destroys him, or at least attempts to do so, she specifically destroys this queer male–mother link. Given the sheer prevalence of the mother-son bond in the backstories of horror-movie male monsters, one must assume that a peculiarly vexing aspect of the films is precisely this bond, which the Finalizing Woman doubles and reverses. She effects the split between the queer male child and mother while she *restores* the bond between the straight male viewer and mother’s body through fetishism, a practice that *disavows* the mother-child split. Fetishism, then, cuts only one way. And in destroying the monster, she also destroys the original phallic mother that bred him, replacing her with a properly exogamous sexual object that can lead to proper heterosexual relations outside of the family. The phallic

mother cedes to the Finalizing Woman, the phallicized, acceptably normative woman outside the family and therefore an acceptable object of heterosexual male desire who ensures a proper resolution to the horror film's baroque new version of the Oedipus complex.

The chief disavowal of the horror film, therefore, is not knowledge of the heterosexual male viewer's own masochistic investment in the heroine but, rather, the extent to which his investment in her matches that which the monster places in *his* mother, and that which connects the homosexual male to his mother in classical psychoanalytic theory. Which is to say, insofar as fetishism is a strategy for avoiding homosexuality, and insofar as the horror film wages a battle between fetishistic and homosexual investments, what the horror film works to do, through the transformation of the heroine into the Finalizing Woman, is to resolve psychosexual anxieties by properly heterosexualizing the viewer, the heroine, and the narrative, emphasizing the fetishistic affinities between viewer and heroine, on the one hand, and eradicating homosexual-narcissistic potentialities, on the other hand. The bond between homosexual male and mother cedes to heterosexual male fetishism. In other words: out with Mother and out with queerness, in with Woman and exogamous heterosexual desire.

A Monstrous Inversion: *Alien Resurrection*

As I have argued earlier, modern horror more or less reaches a terminus point in *The Silence of the Lambs*, an ironic development because it is with this film that it perhaps also reaches its aesthetic height. While modern horror quickly cedes to postmodern horror, which eschews the core characteristics of the concealed woman's film, some works of horror after *Silence*, the latter two *Alien* films in particular, continue to resonate with woman's film themes. The most disturbing development, by far, in late-stage modern horror films is that they allegorically figure the struggle between action heroine and deviant male as one that occurs between a *lesbian* heroine and a *transgendered* queer male whose somatic as well as social otherness *cannot exist* in the normative world. An emergent narrative of these films is that bonds between women are soldered by the elimination of queer masculinity.

The struggle between the lesbian-coded Clarice Starling and the failed transsexual Jame Gumb typifies this emergent narrative. A less obvious example occurs in Jean-Pierre Jeunet's gorgeous, flawed, and mesmerizing *Alien Resurrection* (1997). This fourth film in the *Alien* quartet (before the rise of the *Aliens versus Predator* franchise) resurrects Ellen Ripley (played by the great Sigourney Weaver), the military officer turned alien-fighting action heroine, as a clone. In Ripley's clone, human blood and the acid Alien blood, seething and sizzling, combine. In David Fincher's *Alien 3*—in my view one of the great feminist films

and as such in sharp contrast to Fincher's subsequent work—Ripley, impregnated with an Alien fetus, commits suicide at the end in order to prevent the Company, the shadowy Orwellian-Foucauldian government agency that wants to turn the Aliens into mass-market weapons, from getting their hands on her demon seed. In *Alien Resurrection*, her resistance to the Aliens transmutes into ambivalent assimilation, as she both agitates against and adheres to the menacing, slaverling metallic-insectoid creatures. As recent critics have argued, *Alien Resurrection* can be strongly interpreted as a lesbian narrative, with the clone Ripley as older lesbian mentor to female android Call (Winona Ryder).⁵³ If this is indeed the case, the confrontation between Ripley and the Newborn at the climax reimagines and restages the climax of *Silence*: a showdown between the lesbian and the monstrous queer transgendered body.

The Alien Queen of *Alien Resurrection*, spawned from and crossed with the original Ripley's human DNA, gives birth as a human woman does, from her womb. (The previous incarnation of the Queen laid eggs.) Her wild offspring, a hideous and poignant monster fusion of the Alien and the human, commonly known in fan circles as the Newborn, has Alien skeletal structure but pink, flapping human skin and sad, scary human eyes. The Newborn also appears to be hermaphroditic, though also primarily male, with loose, sagging breasts and male and female sexual organs. The Newborn's first act is to destroy the Alien Queen. After killing his Alien mother, he turns to Ripley and licks her face, establishing that *she* is his preferred mother, with whom he shares an erotically intense bond: the Newborn has two mommies, one of whom he kills. He then proceeds to chomp off and devour the head of one of the scientists (Brad Dourif) whose fevered experiments gave him life. The most grotesque and freakish embodiment of the psychotic and sexually suspect killer locked in the tormenting embrace of the mother, the Newborn is the posthuman, science-fiction horror sibling of Norman Bates, Jason Voorhees, Jame Gumb, and many others. Only this time, it is the *mother* who kills the monstrous son.

In the climax aboard the ship on which Ripley and Call escape the exploding facility where these creatures were spawned, the Newborn, with human sadism substituting for the primal, animalistic Alien savagery, begins tormenting Call, uncoiling her android innards, much as Gumb sadistically removes women's flesh from their bodies. Enter Ripley, like Clarice, to save the screaming lamb, Call. Ripley distracts the Newborn and instructs Call to follow her lead in strapping herself down to the ship. Ingeniously, Ripley flings her own acid-Alien-human blood against the window of the revved-up and roaring ship. In a poetic effect, the blood sizzles against the glass, dissolving it. The unmoored Newborn finds himself sucked into the hole in the window, his innards pulsing out into space. In one of the most heartbreaking looks of betrayal in the cinema, the stunned Newborn gazes at Ripley as it hits the window and, howling

in anguish, finds itself vacuumed out into oblivion. Tearfully, Ripley whispers, “I’m sorry” as the Newborn gruesomely dies. The imagery used to depict the death of the Newborn at Ripley’s hand unmistakably suggests abortion, and a host of other concerns (cloning, selective breeding). The Newborn is something that cannot, must not, be allowed to exist.

In the final image of Jeunet’s director’s cut (unused in the theatrical release), Ripley and Call sit in the desert of a future Earth, feminist reinterpretations of heroes of the western genre (which suggests the queer woman as a more successful, appealing update of the classic American killer male than the slasher serial killer). In the affecting final scene in the theatrical cut, they look out at the inviting green Earth below. “I’m a stranger here myself,” says Ripley. The implication is that the two female characters, like a sapphic Adam and Eve, will be inheriting a new world and can begin civilization afresh, with all of the foreign threats of the previous films—the Alien, cyborgs—safely rehabilitated. Demeter and Persephone reunite on Earth, reimagined as a lesbian couple or perhaps as two Persephones, freed from Demeter and Hades both. *Alien Resurrection* seems to conclude, in either version, with the promise of a fulfilled and fulfilling utopian lesbian romance. Resonant though it is, *Alien Resurrection* is deeply disturbing on an ideological level. This queer woman’s film seems predicated on the destruction of the transgendered queer male body, grotesquely figured as the Newborn. The allegorical suggestion is that a lesbian identity can only be sanctioned by the elimination of a threatening, repulsive, and mysteriously violent queer otherness.⁵⁴

Lesbianism and the Finalizing Woman

What do we make of the Finalizing Woman—the enforcer of closure and sexual normativity—if she is also herself a queer character? I have elsewhere argued that the lesbian heroine, figured as the “tough woman,” is “a female Terminator, designed to look and act like a patriarchy-defying heroine but programmed to destroy patriarchy’s deviant enemies, queer men and power-seeking women.”⁵⁵ If this is the case, what is especially striking about the lesbian version of the action heroine is her mournful attitude to the destruction of the queer male. The most poignant moments in both films, the scenes in which the heroine destroys the monstrous nonnormative male in *Silence* and *Alien Resurrection*, refuse any sense of triumph or even of relief in vanquishing the monster. A disturbing figure, the lesbian version of the Finalizing Woman exudes a double consciousness: she dutifully performs her queer-extirpating role but recognizes the paradoxical nature of the predicament she shares with the monster, mourning even as she effects his destruction.⁵⁶

When Clarice kills Jame Gumb, her attitude is one of blank, stunned quiet, recalling Lane’s grief-stricken horror in *Flamingo Road* at Semple’s death, in

striking contrast to her Death-Mother pose. This notably subdued response contrasts with the mournful lyricism of the montage sequence Demme uses to convey Jame Gumb's sorrowful end. Light bursts through bullet holes Clarice has made in the dark, sealed-shut windows, illuminating a combat helmet and a child-size American flag and, on the opposite wall, a Chinese mural of a butterfly, swirling in poignant juxtaposition with the failed butterfly Gumb, who with his arms somewhat extended and thick, bulbous night-vision goggles and bloody death throes looks like a squashed bug, an apposite metaphor for his failed metamorphosis. Our study comes full circle: the butterfly motif of the glorious potentialities of female transformation in *Now, Voyager* becomes the grisly, ironic, sad symbol of the monstrous male's inability to transform. There is no sense whatsoever that Jame Gumb will come back to life and frighten Clarice again, though it should be added that Lecter lives on, his spirit of perversity left bracingly and terrifyingly free.

The Athena Function

I have been arguing that a strange and compelling figure rises up in the woman's film and recurs in modern horror: the Fury, an embattled woman who ultimately enacts retributive justice on errant, misogynistic males. Given that she brings calm to a furious war of desires, the Finalizing Woman may be said to play not so much the Fury as the goddess Athena in the *Oresteia*, a continuation of the woman's film themes I discussed in [Chapter 2](#). In Aeschylus's tragic trilogy—*Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, *The Eumenides*—Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife, kills him upon his return from the Trojan War for having sacrificed their daughter, Iphigenia, for better results in the war. Seeking revenge on his mother for having killed his father, Orestes then kills Clytemnestra, his sister Electra siding with him. The ensuing mayhem of guilt and justice is embodied by the Furies—known, placatingly, as the Eumenides, or the Kindly Ones—who hunt down Orestes to make him pay for his crime of matricide. Finally, Athena, the goddess of wisdom and justice, comes down and holds court, deciding Orestes's fate in a trial that is commonly read as the beginnings of the modern Western justice system. Athena's declaration, influenced by Apollo's antiwoman counsel—that she prefers and always sides with the male and that therefore Orestes is innocent—establishes patriarchal law as such.

The Finalizing Woman of the horror film performs the same function as Athena, coming down into a world of violent chaos and establishing order specifically by invoking the Father's Law. She also resembles the Portia of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, treated by Freud in his "Three Caskets" essay, who ensures heterosexual closure as she destroys the monster with the full force of the law. (The Jewish villain Shylock, in his apparent opposition to everything

Christian, i.e., normative, is as apposite a complement to the horror-film monster as any villainous figure. Yet who is truly the villain of this play, the scheming but ultimately pitiable Shylock or the apparently noble but actually quite ruthless and absolute enforcer of the law, Portia?) In the end, the Finalizing Woman is a peculiar and particularly forceful embodiment of the phallographic order, wielding the phallus when the time comes to annihilate the queer monster, ceding to the normative sexual order once her appointed task has been completed. Obviously, this is a counterintuitive reading of a perverse scenario; clearly, the heroine must contend with and defeat a horrifically cruel and implacable evil simply in order to survive. Yet her ideological function exceeds her narrative predicaments. Rather than fighting on behalf of all women and of her queer subjects as well as her masochistic male heterosexual ones, she fights on behalf of the law, installing its implacable logic. She brings the law into the barren forest where the killer lives alone until confronted by the endless spectacle of sexual functionality (those fervidly copulating teens). The only option available to the queer viewer is to side with the monster who slays or the Girl who slays him—his queer revulsion or her revulsion at his queerness.

The sheer plethora of rude shocks and grotesque violations of the body and states of emotional and somatic trauma in the horror film emerge, finally, as desperate distractions against the ultimately unavoidable knowledge of this particular struggle and what the stakes are, for all viewers, within it. In *Recreational Terror*, one of the best studies of horror-film spectatorship, Isabel Cristina Pinedo discusses her against-the-grain love for horror movies and the inherent difficulties of being a feminist critic who loves a genre often perceived as decidedly antiwoman: “It matters what representations of women abound in culture, [but] the tendency to see the horror film as monolithically destructive of female subjectivity overlooks the contradictory dynamics within the genre as well as the complexity with which audiences respond to it.” The horror film, Pinedo argues, must be appreciated in all of its complexity.⁵⁷

Like Pinedo, I remain true to my love for genres, such as horror and the woman’s film, often critiqued for their ideological failings, a critique that deemphasizes the potential radicalism *within* these genres; and like her, I am left dissatisfied by the limitations of Clover’s work. Yet the horror film’s particular deployment of gender and sexual identity and their confusions provide as many difficulties as they do vivid, transgressive pleasures. From the classical Hollywood era to the present, genre film provides a crucible for cultural and social struggles over gender and sexuality, merging oppression with hope for liberation.

CODA

The Brave One

Key themes in the woman's film endure in Hollywood representations of femininity to the present day. Neil Jordan's film *The Brave One* (2007) gives us an illuminating opportunity to consider the influence of the woman's film on the later genre of the rape-revenge film, an important subgenre of modern horror. *The Brave One* leads us to a renewed consideration of the theme of transformation in the woman's film, arguably the central theme not only in this genre but in modern horror as well.

Women and the Cinematic Chrysalis

In *The Brave One*, Jodie Foster stars as Erica Bain, a radio-show host for an NPR-like station, who endures a grotesquely vicious attack in Central Park one night that leaves her fiancé dead and her a shattered woman, physically as well as emotionally. Erica, having enormous difficulty coping with her corporeal and psychic injuries, illegally buys a gun for her protection. Within a few hours, she has used that gun to kill a psychopath who just killed his ex-wife in a nighttime scene set in a bodega. From there, killing violent predators becomes an obsessive activity Erica must do in order to survive, and her transformation into a vigilante has led many critics to speak of *The Brave One* as a return to the vigilante film genre that thrived in the 1970s, and to reflect upon the general implications of what appears to be the current Hollywood desire to return to the grittier days of the New Hollywood. (Foster herself in interviews has stoked the debate, comparing her new film to Martin Scorsese's brutal, dream-like 1976 masterpiece *Taxi Driver*, in which the young Foster costarred as a child prostitute.)

While *The Brave One* certainly does hearken back to certain principles of 1970s filmmaking—especially in its boxed-in tone of the urban space as emotionally desolate, murderous void—and the vigilante genre, especially in its form as woman's rape-revenge fantasy, the real genre at the heart of the film's

revisionist project is the woman's film melodrama that flourished in the classical Hollywood era. With its theme of a woman's transformation, *The Brave One* not only reformulates the woman's film but also adheres very closely to several of its most important, pervasive—yet still surprisingly undertheorized—thematic elements. Perhaps most important, Jordan's film is truly "Genre-Hybridic": with its passages of moody isolation and uncanny atmosphere, its traumatic events that seem to be playing out in the heroine's mind, the film often feels like a work in the horror genre. An important, and frustrating, film, *The Brave One* allows us to consider the theme of transformation in its centrality both to the woman's film and to modern horror.

Erica hosts the radio show "Streetwalk," devoted to commenting in gnomically witty and elegiac fashion on curious events and changes in the new, post-Giuliani New York City, such as the shutting down of the Plaza Hotel. Contentedly prowling around the urban landscape, microphone in the air recording various sounds, Erica conducts the city as symphony. Erica is also very much in love with her fiancé David (the handsome British-Indian actor Naveen Andrews, who played Sayid on *Lost*). As Foster plays Erica in these early scenes, she's energetic, driven by her own happiness, almost poignantly hyper. Right after having ordered wedding invitations and going to a friend's art-show opening, Erica meets up with David, and they go back to their apartment, pick up their dog, and take a walk in nighttime Central Park. In the park during a discussion of their impending nuptials, David asks her why they don't simply elope, to which Erica responds that they are getting married for family's sake, specifically for David's, as she doesn't have any. As they talk, they realize that their dog, which they've allowed to run off his leash, has disappeared down one of those long, dark Central Park passageways. Walking down the passageway to get him back, they are surprised by a gang of Latino toughs, who hold their dog and tauntingly ask for a reward. What follows is one of the most excruciatingly visceral and brutal accounts of violence ever depicted in a Hollywood film, most of which centers on Erica, who is smashed against a concrete wall to the left of the screen and then, once she staggers to her feet, smashed again against the opposite wall, and also savagely kicked. David is bludgeoned to death.

It's easy to see, from what follows, the vigilante genre origins of the film, especially Abel Ferrara's 1981 *Ms. 45*, in which a woman, raped twice on her way home from work, turns into a man-killing machine. In *Ms. 45*, the attack the heroine undergoes is a sexual one. *The Brave One's* monstrous and pivotal attack sequence is, in terms of what happens to Erica, notably devoid of any sexual tension or sexual activity. The chief concern of the representation of violence here is the pulverizing of the body (as well as the Iraq War resonances of the images of the violence captured on the perpetrators' cell phones). When Erica is being attacked, her attackers seem to want to smash her body to smithereens. The Erica who

eventually reawakens and returns to the world will, in a few more scenes, appear completely unchanged physically, her transformation having occurred within. What's most interesting about the film once Erica transforms into a vigilante is its transformation from a gritty realistic urban thriller into something much closer to lyrical horror, an allegorical, dreamlike space in which every interaction between its heroine and another character seems fated, inevitable. Almost every situation in which Erica finds herself provides her with another opportunity to relive her horrific trauma and triumph over it by killing her attackers, be they African American teenagers or a hideously amoral tycoon who will most likely kill his stepdaughter because she witnessed him killing her mother.

The vigilante aspects of the film are rote, predictable, and deeply unimaginative; in many ways, this film has a repugnant moral intelligence amplified by the ways in which it attempts to transmute its crude logic into something more glossily thoughtful, brooding, and penetrating. It would have been a much better film if it had simply given in to its trashy origins, as the one truly inspired sequence does: Erica rescues a brutalized young prostitute (Zoë Kravitz) kept nearly unconscious in a drug-induced stupor by the sinister and sleazy guy who's kept her in his car "since Vegas." Playing a prostitute herself, Erica gets in the backseat and, in a daring embrace of her lesbian cult status, Foster injects a note of sapphic sexuality in her exchanges with this young victim. Erica's rescue of the girl is the one sequence in the film (other than the first violent attack) in which Jordan seems to be giving in to the material and drawing upon his poetic cinematic gifts; it also showcases Foster's signature witty grit. One is reminded here of the erotically charged mother-daughter bonds in the woman's film and modern horror. One is also reminded of their loss, as thematized in these genre films and also signaled by the transition from one genre form to another. The uses made of another mother figure, an African woman neighbor (Ene Oloja) with an almost biblical gravitas, who looks out for Erica, continues the strategy of displacement in the woman's film, reminding the audience of the motherlessness of the single, modern woman and the loss of mother-daughter bonds necessitated by the daughter's entrance into modernity and the patriarchal order. While the transition from modern to postmodern horror has signaled a break from enduring woman's film themes, Jordan's film also suggests that these themes continue to animate the more genre-hybridic era that has flowed from cinematic postmodernity.

The Brave One certainly seems very much in keeping with the new wave of violent and brazenly politically incorrect films and television shows that indulge in deeply racist images and motifs under the guise of being unflinching "raw" visions of our imperiled cultural moment, and *The Brave One* needs a thorough analysis of both its racism and its crude moral vision. (While political correctness, the "positive images" argument, has often blunted Hollywood history as

it has produced pabulum, this new wave of self-consciously politically incorrect film and television seems less intellectually daring than it does ideologically suspect, a determined attempt to shock through unflinching “honesty.” “Genre-Hybridic” certainly does not mean “progressive.”) But the film is, for all its myriad failings, a highly important one because of the ways in which it rehearses and reimagines what are, in my view, the chief themes of the woman’s film: transformation and female vengeance. The genre-hybridic *The Brave One* clarifies the overlaps between the history of the woman’s film and later genres such as female crime, rape revenge, and especially horror. If on the face of it a comparison between this violent, disturbing film and the woman’s film seems a jarring one, my hope is that the discussion that has preceded this claim makes this comparison less unlikely, while in no way less disturbing.

Notes

Chapter 1

1. That we should read Freud allegorically is one of the central positions Dollimore maintains in his *Sexual Dissidence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
2. Janet Walker, *Couching Resistance: Women, Film, and Psychoanalytic Psychiatry* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 51.
3. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading: or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You," in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–40. This is a valuable essay. What is odd about it, though, is how uncritically Sedgwick reads her own previous work, which certainly foregrounded paranoia.
4. That the theory has a clichéd quality at this point does not blunt the horror and violence of its meaning; cliché becomes a kind of cultural forgetting secondary to widespread assimilation of what had once been an appropriately shocking theory of human social and personal development.
5. Sigmund Freud, "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes," in *The Ego and the Id and Other Works, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, 24 vols. (1953–74; repr., London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1993), 19:256 (original emphasis).
6. As Leo Bersani describes it, "The superego is the child endowed with the father's authority *and* with the child's aggressiveness against that authority; and this monster of moralized violence unreservedly attacks its own double—the child's ego as the father—with all the violence perhaps originally projected onto the real father (and which may indeed have been nothing more from the very start than the 'real' scenario necessary in order for the child to replicate it as a psychic scene)." See Bersani, *The Freudian Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 22.
7. Freud, "Some Psychical Consequences," *The Standard Edition*, 19:251.
8. The Electra complex, proposed by Jung but rejected by Freud as a female equivalent to the male-centered Oedipus complex, derives from Aeschylus's tragic trilogy the *Oresteia*, in which Electra sides with her brother Orestes after he murders their mother, Clytemnestra, who killed their father, Agamemnon, for having sacrificed their daughter, Iphigenia, to the gods. I discuss this trilogy in Chapters 2 and 5.

9. After the most of this book was written, I came across Nancy Kulish and Deanna Holtzman's work on the relevance of the Demeter-Persephone myth to Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Challenging his efforts to shoehorn femininity into an oedipal narrative, these authors also propose that we theorize femininity through the "Persephone complex." As the authors note, "all of the early psychoanalytic theorists, and some later ones, have been impressed by the strength of the girl's attachment to the mother and the concomitant anxieties about loss of love and loss of the object. This observation, however, did not fit readily into pre-existing theory and was consistently taken as evidence of the strength of the pre-Oedipal maternal attachment. We argue that *typical development for girls became pre-Oedipalized, that is, pathologized, in traditional psychoanalytic theory.*" See Holtzman and Kulish, *A Story of Her Own: The Female Oedipus Complex Reexamined and Renamed* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, 2008), 11 (original emphasis). The authors provide a helpful overview of the female psychoanalytic response to and revision of Freud's troublesome writings. Their goal, however, is to provide an updated theory of female development through clinical evidence, whereas my focus is on Freud as an influential mythmaker and philosopher who, in this capacity, has had a profound influence on art in the twentieth century and beyond. I see Freud's writings as no less entrenched in mythic discourse than classical writers and full of the same provocative insights and vexations that inhere within classical myth.
10. See especially Nancy Chodorow's *Femininities, Masculinities, Sexualities: Freud and Beyond (The Blazer Lectures)* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990.)
11. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 147.
12. Freud, "Female Sexuality," *The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and Its Discontents and Other Works, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, 24 vols. (1953–74; repr., London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1993), 21:226.
13. *Ibid.*, 230–31.
14. Mary Jacobus, *First Things: The Maternal Imaginary in Literature, Art, and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 18.
15. Diane E. Jonte-Pace, *Speaking the Unspeakable: Religion, Misogyny, and the Uncanny Mother in Freud's Cultural Texts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
16. Freud, "The Theme of the Three Caskets," *Case History of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, 24 vols. (1953–74; repr., London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1993), 12:291.
17. *Ibid.*, 292 (original emphasis).
18. *Ibid.*, 292–93.
19. *Ibid.*, 293–94.
20. *Ibid.*, 296.
21. See, for example, Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Amy

- Lawrence, *Echo and Narcissus: Women's Voices in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
22. Freud, "The Theme of the Three Caskets," *The Standard Edition*, 12:298.
 23. *Ibid.*, 299.
 24. *Ibid.*
 25. *Ibid.*, 301.
 26. See Modleski's treatment of *Vertigo* in her *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005).
 27. Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 11–12.

Chapter 2

1. Berlant writes that Jaquith's method "does not involve the use of transference to dissolve symptoms by reconstructing the patient's memorial fragments into a narrative that makes a context for them, as in Freudian psychotherapy." His method, instead, is to provide the patient "with catchphrases whose utterance is like a passport into an alternate memory and personality." See Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 186.
2. Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986), 35–44. The article was first published in *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929): 303–13.
3. Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 38.
4. Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 41. See also Lea Jacobs's important treatment, "Now, Voyager: Some Problems of Enunciation and Sexual Difference," *Camera Obscura* 7 (1981): 89–104. For an interesting counterpoint to these essays, see M. Lynda Ely, "'The untold want': Representation and Transformation, Echoes of Walt Whitman's *Passage to India* in *Now, Voyager*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* (January 29, 2001): 43–52. Stanley Cavell has written perceptively and often about the film.
5. Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).
6. Martin Shingler, "Masquerade or Drag? Bette Davis and the Ambiguities of Gender," *Screen* 36, no. 3 (1995).
7. See Brett Farmer, *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Male Spectatorships* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: BFI, 1986); Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
8. I cannot do justice in this broad chapter to the complexity of Berlant's reading, but here is, essentially, her view of the film: "A cliché version of the [Olive Higgins Prouty] novel, largely sanitized of the novel's ambivalence toward the demands of love on femininity." Berlant, *Female Complaint*, 180. Clearly, my own view of *Now, Voyager* is quite different.

9. Patricia White, "Hitchcock and Hom(m)osexuality," in *Hitchcock, Past and Future*, ed. Richard Allen and Sam Ishii-Gonzales (New York: Routledge, 2004), 221–25.
10. See Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 194.
11. Robert Lang, *Masculine Interests: Homoerotics in Hollywood Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
12. Of course, gay male love of the woman star extends well beyond film and is broader than superstardom. One thinks of Lindsay Wagner's indelible Jaime Sommers on the 1970s television show *The Bionic Woman* and Kate Mulgrew's Captain Janeway on *Star Trek: Voyager*, and of gay icons such as Eartha Kitt and Lynn Redgrave, who never quite achieved mainstream fame.
13. Robert B. Ray, in *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930–1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), argues that several Hollywood films operate as "concealed Westerns" (70–89, especially). I would extend his theory to include the reappearance, in disguised, occluded, reupholstered, and otherwise transformed guises, of seemingly obsolete and discarded genres such as the woman's film melodrama.
14. Jeanine Basinger, *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930–1960* (Hanover, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 20.
15. *Ibid.*, 7.
16. Andrea S. Walsh, *Women's Film and Female Experience, 1940–1950* (New York: Praeger, 1984), 23–24.
17. Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 31.
18. Haskell is writing within what is now commonly viewed as "reflection studies," a view that Hollywood films "reflect society." Though often disparaged by academic feminism in the past, nonacademic feminist critics like Haskell have been more positively incorporated into academic film studies in recent years. For a sharp and succinct overview of the course of feminist film criticism from the 1970s to the present, see Janet McCabe, *Feminist Film Studies: Writing the Woman into Cinema* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004).
19. This essay is collected in Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd ed. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
20. Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, 3.
21. *Ibid.*, 4.
22. Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987), 43–70.
23. Jackie Byars, *All That Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 14.
24. Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000).
25. *Ibid.*, 191.
26. *Ibid.*, 202.
27. Robert Lang, *American Film Melodrama: Griffith, Vidor, Minnelli* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 8.

28. Linda Williams, "‘Something Else Besides a Mother’: Stella Dallas and the Maternal Melodrama," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 137–62.
29. Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman’s Life* (1986; repr., New York: Ballantine, 1989), *passim*.
30. In this chapter, I explore the central tensions in and the “cultural work,” to use Jane Tompkins’s phrase, undertaken by the woman’s film. My use of Tompkins’s phrase, however, should not be taken to imply my endorsement of her larger claims in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Whereas Tompkins views the female worlds of the nineteenth-century American literary texts she studies, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in particular, as positively organized around an inherently benevolent matriarchy, I see the figure of “mother” in the woman’s film (quite directly influenced by the nineteenth-century texts Tompkins discusses; slave-driver Simon Legree’s haunting mother in Stowe’s novel is a good example) and of modern horror as a disquieting, disturbing one. In any event, the “maternal” thematic is central to the woman’s film and to horror, in my view.
31. Josephine Donovan, *After the Fall: The Demeter-Persephone Myth in Wharton, Cather, and Glasgow* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 3.
32. *Ibid.*, 11.
33. *Ibid.*
34. See Andrew Britton, *Katharine Hepburn: Star as Feminist* (1984; repr., New York: Continuum, 1995), 156; Judith Mayne, *Directed by Dorothy Arzner* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 114–22.
35. See Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, chapter 5.
36. Helene P. Foley, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter: Translation, Commentary, and Interpretive Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).
37. *Ibid.*, 83.
38. *Ibid.*, 40.
39. See Tania Modleski’s essay on *Notorious* in her study *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), in which she discusses the ways in which the masochistic suffering of Alicia Huberman (Ingrid Bergman) can be interpreted as an expression of rage.
40. Foley, *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 39, emphasis mine.
41. *Ibid.*, lines 360–69.
42. *Ibid.*, commentary to lines 370–71, 56.
43. Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, “Feminine Guilt and the Oedipus-Complex,” in *Female Sexuality*, ed. Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), 94–134.
44. Christine Downing, ed., *The Long Journey Home: Re-visioning the Myth of Demeter and Persephone for Our Time* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1994), 142.
45. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).
46. Downing, *The Long Journey Home*, 143.
47. *Ibid.*
48. Mick LaSalle, *Complicated Women: Sex and Power in Pre-Code Hollywood* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2001).

49. E. Ann Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor's *Stella Dallas*," in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 126–62. Citation is from page 127.
50. As she further notes, "Only the 'tragic mulatto' plot (as in *Pinky*), popular in the late 1940s, gave some dignity to a black woman's role." See Walsh, *Women's Film and Female Experience*, 28.
51. Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, 80.
52. For the most part, black women would have to wait for the glorious Cicely Tyson films of the 1970s and Pam Grier's pugnacious Blaxploitation action flicks of the same decade to begin to see black women stars of film. Still, it is important to remember that great black female stars like Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne, and Eartha Kitt, character actors like Beah Richards and Juanita Moore, and TV stars like Diahann Carroll and Nichelle Nichols (the beloved Uhura of *Star Trek*) were about to flood the movies with their grace, beauty, and talent, and that the woman's film would prove elastic enough a genre to be reimagined in ways that put black women at the center—*The Long Walk Home* (1990, Richard Pearce), in which Sissy Spacek and Whoopi Goldberg battle racism together; *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998, Kevin Rodney Sullivan), based on Terry McMillan's novel; *Waiting to Exhale* (1995, Forest Whitaker); the superb 2000 Deborah Pratt film *Cora Unashamed*, starring the great Regina Taylor and Cherry Jones, based on Langston Hughes's short story; and the much-debated *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire* (2009, Lee Daniels).
53. Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, 329.
54. Ellen Handler Spitz, *Image and Insight: Essays in Psychoanalysis and the Arts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 164.
55. Jeanine Basinger, *The Star Machine* (New York: Knopf, 2007).
56. Mayne, *Directed by Dorothy Arzner*, 120.
57. Amy Jenkins, "The fantasy that is violent women: Making *Kick-Ass*'s main character female is what gives it a twist," *The Independent*, March 31, 2010, <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/amy-jenkins-the-fantasy-that-is-violent-women-1931452.html> (accessed April 23, 2010).
58. E. Ann Kaplan, "Introduction to New Edition," in *Women in Film Noir*, rev. ed. (1978; repr., London: British Film Institute, 2008), 1.
59. *Ibid.*, 10.
60. Angela Martin, "'Gilda Didn't Do Any of Those Things You've Been Losing Sleep Over!': The Central Women of 40s Film Noirs," in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan, rev. ed. (1978; repr., London: British Film Institute, 2008), 202–28.
61. *Ibid.*, 209–10.
62. *Ibid.*, 218.
63. See Mary Ann Doane, "Female Spectatorship and the Machines of Projection: *Caught and Rebecca*," in *The Desire to Desire*, 155–76; Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama"; Ed Galfant, "Black Satin: Fantasy, Murder and the Couple in '*Gaslight*' and '*Rebecca*,'" *Screen* 29 (1988): 84–105.
64. See the chapter on *Rebecca*, "Female Spectator, Lesbian Specter," in White, *Uninvited*, 61–94.

65. For a discussion of lesbian fetishism, see the Elizabeth Grosz, "Lesbian Fetishism?" in Emily S. Apter and William Pietz, *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).
66. Wendy Doniger, *The Woman Who Pretended to Be Who She Was: Myths of Self-Imitation* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005).
67. See the last chapter, "You Freud, Me Hitchcock," of Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (1989; repr., New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
68. Michele Piso, "Mark's Marnie," in *A Hitchcock Reader*, ed. Marshall Deutelbaum and Leland Poague, 2nd ed. (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 280–94.
69. *Ibid.*, 288.

Preface to Part II

1. For a representative discussion of the importance of Freud's theory of the return of the repressed to horror, see Virginia Wright Wexman, "The Trauma of Infancy in Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby*," in *American Horrors: Essays on the Modern American Horror Film*, ed. Gregory A. Waller (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 30–44. Freud's essay "The Uncanny" is collected in *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, 24 vols. (1953–74; repr., London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1993), 17:217–56.
2. Rick Worland, *The Horror Film: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 15.
3. See Robin Wood's essay "The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s," in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan . . . and Beyond*, rev. ed. by Robin Wood (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 63–85.
4. Linda Badley, *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 13. Jonathan Lake Crane expresses a similar dissatisfaction with the psychoanalytic critique of repression as key to horror. See Crane, *Terror and Everyday Life: Singular Moments in the History of the Horror Film* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994).
5. Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); see especially chapter 5, "Reading Counterclockwise: Paranoid Gothic or Gothic Paranoia," 107–38.

Chapter 3

1. Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 61n.
2. Shelley Stamp Lindsey, "Horror, Femininity, and Carrie's Monstrous Puberty" in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 281.
3. Abigail Lynn Coykendall presents the problem of deciphering what she calls De Palma's "phallocentrism" as "a difficult endeavor," because he "has himself already performed his own manipulation of the scopic drive via a distinctly self-referential

- hermeneutics of desire” (330). He “does indeed attempt to give ‘voice’ to the constrained, ‘castrated’ role that women . . . frequently play in films of any genre: namely, to display the audience’s own disavowed fears and helpless, paranoid reactions.” His films evoke “multivalent desires” (335). Despite her insights into the difficulty of De Palma films, Coykendall’s essay makes what is in my view a disastrous maneuver: she treats De Palma’s film and King’s novel as one and the same. In her reading, both artists treat with great apprehension a female power seen as newly inevitable thanks to the success of feminism, with its ability to give women access to birth control pills and other new corporeal technologies and freedoms. De Palma’s baroque but also female-identified (admittedly not the same as feminist) sensibility and King’s are utterly distinct, but Coykendall views them, ultimately, as the same author. See Coykendall, “Bodies Cinematic, Bodies Politic: The ‘Male’ Gaze and the ‘Female’ Gothic in De Palma’s *Carrie*,” *Journal of Narrative Theory* 30, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 332–63. The predictability and therefore the knowability of Carrie’s menstruating body, argues Aviva Briefel in dispute with Shelley Stamp Lindsey’s reading, “*compounds* our identification with the female monster” (my emphasis). Yet Briefel concludes her essay on the horror film with a reading of the genre as sexist in its relegation of a distancing masochism to the male monster and a feeling, empathy-inducing pain to the female one. The audience is barred from identifying with the masochistic male monster as it is encouraged to identify with the pain of the female one. Through this sexual segregation, the horror film “sets a safe parameter around the [horror film] spectators’ alleged masochism,” thus foregoing the potentially radical experience of the horror film. Though she makes many striking points, I am not in agreement with Briefel’s view here. To take *Carrie* as an example, points of identification with Carrie undergo so many radical changes and challenges throughout the film that our own spectatorial position can only be described as liquid. See Aviva Briefel, “Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film,” *Film Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2005): 16–27.
4. For an excellent overview of critical views of De Palma’s purported misogyny and a careful, measured, and persuasive challenge to these views, see Kenneth MacKinnon, *Misogyny in the Movies: The De Palma Question* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), especially the lengthy discussion of *Carrie* in chapter 6.
 5. “An explosion of drugs, sex and trance-like music invaded Off-Off Broadway, exemplified by Richard Schechner’s Euripides adaptation *Dionysus in ’69*, played in a converted garage on Wooster Street,” writes critic Dan Callahan. “This production so impressed Brian De Palma that he invested a lot of his own money trying to make a filmed record of the performance, and he spent two years on the project, mainly because he wanted to utilize split-screens in order to replicate the play’s open-ended freedom.” Dan Callahan, “Dionysus,” <http://www.reverseshot.com/article/dionysus> (accessed July 16, 2010).
 6. MacKinnon observes that *Dionysus in ’69*, based on Euripides’s play, foregrounds the hazards of the male gaze, since it climaxes in the beheading of Pentheus, who, refusing to believe in Dionysus, spies on the wine god’s group of nocturnal female worshippers, the Maenads, who rend animals’ flesh in the nighttime forest. One of these Maenads is Pentheus’ mother. When the Maenads discover Pentheus voyeuristically gazing upon them, they rip off his head; his mother, before she regains

her daytime senses, carries his head on a stick. See MacKinnon, *Misogyny in the Movies*, 186–87. *Carrie* demands an analysis of this earlier film's overlaps with its own themes, which extend the Greek myth into Catholicism as well as secular modernism.

7. When criticized for “portraying graphic violence, De Palma responds that he is incorporating Eisenstein’s theory of montage as conflict, that ‘film is violence.’ Stylization acts to aesthetically distance De Palma’s violence so that it becomes a visual effect rather than a naturalistic detail.” See *The Encyclopedia of Film*, ed. James Monaco et al. (New York: Perigee Books, 1991), 152.
8. The film’s thematic fixation on bonds between women is one of the many reasons why Dmetri Kakmi’s appealing but limited analysis of the film misses the mark. Kakmi argues for the patriarchal significance of the key Carrie wears around her neck:

Sissy Spacek revealed that the key is used to unlock a box kept under her bed, which contains, among other things, a photograph of Tommy and her father (these scenes were excised from the final cut). In a Freudian sense, Carrie has collapsed father into object of desire and keeps them both imprisoned in her box. We can hardly overlook the echoes here of Ovid’s retelling of the incestuous tale of Myrrha and her father Cinyras in *Metamorphoses* . . . In Stephen King’s book (on which the film is based) it is stated that Carrie’s father is the bearer of the ‘telekinesis gene,’ which he has bequeathed upon his daughter. Seen from young Carrie’s point of view, the absent father is like a distant god who descends to plant his seed in a mortal before ascending the heights of Olympus, never to be seen again. Although she lives in an earthly matriarchy, Carrie is very much under the spell of a patriarchal force which keeps her in thrall.

Kakmi goes on to theorize that the key has even greater significance in that it “symbolizes Hecate, Greek goddess of Shades and sorcery,” and also represents the unconscious and the witch’s power of life over death. Overall, I disagree with Kakmi, who makes the same error that Coykendall makes in collapsing De Palma’s film and King’s novel, over the significance of the key. In a Freudian sense, the key metonymically represents Carrie’s sexuality, which she hopes to unlock (echoes of Freud’s famous case history, “Dora”), but what lies within this box remains forever unknown, enigmatic, precisely because the ritual of heterosexual fulfillment and socialization of the prom is itself annihilated. Carrie’s desire finds its clearest expression in her desire for union with the mother, as her final attempt at embracing even her dead mother expresses. That De Palma, who exerts such auteurist control over his cinema, excised any indication of the father’s image says a great deal about his resolutely feminine focus in the film, in which the father is a ghostly, intangible presence, close to irrelevant. “He ran away, Mamma,” Carrie resolutely tells her mother, dispelling any attempt at keeping his ghost alive; if anything, it is Mrs. White who remains haunted by her husband’s presence. See Kakmi, “Myth and Magic in De Palma’s *Carrie*,” <http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/creq/00/3/carrie.html> (accessed July 16, 2010).

9. See Margaret S. Mahler, *On Human Symbiosis and the Vicissitudes of Individuation* (New York: International University Press, 1968).
10. Marcia Ian, *Remembering the Phallic Mother: Psychoanalysis, Modernism, and the Fetish* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 21.

11. Freud, "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes," *The Ego and the Id and Other Works, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, 24 vols. (1953–74; repr., London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1993), 19:254.
12. *Ibid.*, 256.
13. Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 12.
14. *Ibid.* Creed quotes from Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 64
15. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), in *Feminist Literary History*, ed. Mary Eagleton (1986; repr., New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987). I must add that in this essay Rich is shockingly hostile to male homosexuality, which she likens to pedophilia. I would also add that heterosexuality is no less compulsory for males than it is for females.
16. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 64.
17. Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 13; Kristeva quoted from *Powers of Horror*, 74.
18. Mary Ayers, *Mother-Infant Attachment and Psychoanalysis: The Eyes of Shame* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2003), 76–77.
19. Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 82.
20. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* 1 (August 1975): 1–29. Smith-Rosenberg famously argued that Victorian women enjoyed deep ties of intimacy that possibly bordered on the erotic, but in many important works of nineteenth-century fiction, such as Melville's and Nathaniel Hawthorne's, same-sex ties connote hostility and enmity, not connection and intimacy, a view that continues to resonate in De Palma films.
21. "All women," observes Judith Lorber of patriarchal attitudes toward menstruation, "are said to suffer the 'horrors' of 'that time of the month.' . . . In our society, [such] syndromes denigrate women as a group and justify their less-than-fully human status." See Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 49. Obviously, the literature on misogyny and its ramifications in our culture is immense.
22. Here are snippets of the language used in King's description of Carrie during the menstruation-shower scene: "She looked around bovinely. Her hair stuck to her cheeks in a curling helmet shape. There was a cluster of acne on one shoulder . . . She backed away, howling . . . fat forearms crossing her face . . . She looked like an ape." See Stephen King, *Carrie* (1974; repr., New York: Doubleday, 1999), 7, 9, 12.
23. In his study of De Palma's films, Eyal Peretz describes this scene differently, from a philosophical perspective that, I think, misses out on the erotic stakes of De Palma's work. "What Carrie discovers under the shower is precisely that she has a period, that is, that she is a body, and a body as nakedness, that is as something that can bleed and therefore be wounded, a naked body that is not a self-sufficient totality but a vulnerable open surface." But De Palma's fascination with Carrie stems from the fact that hers is a woman's body, not just any philosophically desexed body.

What any analysis of De Palma's cinema needs to address is his fascination and conflictual identification *with the feminine*. See Eyal Peretz, *Becoming Visionary: Brian De Palma's Cinematic Education of the Senses* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 32.

24. According to the documentary "Acting *Carrie*" in the Special Features section of the most recent DVD of the film, a costume designer had changed the gown's color from the script's red to pink; Piper Laurie fought to retain the line, believing, rightly, that it would speak volumes about Mrs. White's attitudes toward sexuality.
25. For an excellent discussion of the play of expressionistic and surrealistic techniques in Hitchcock films, see Richard Allen's excellent recent study of Hitchcock's aesthetics in *Hitchcock's Romantic Irony* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), chapter 6, on color design in Hitchcock, especially.
26. It is a mistake, then, to see the blood that drenches Carrie at the prom as some kind of especially violent return of the repressed—a mistake, that is, to see it exclusively as such. Sexuality is certainly under repressive siege in this film, Margaret White's sex phobia the chief embodiment of this repression. Yet sexuality also has an agency and an explosive visibility all its own. *Carrie* makes it clear that neither Freud's theory of a total cultural repression nor Foucault's of a maximum sexual visibility does justice to the cultural construction and deployment of sexuality. That *both* theorists shed equal light on the issue—that sex is both deeply repressed *and* forced to undergo maximum visibility—tells us a great deal about the fundamentally schismatic and indefinable role sexuality plays in culture.
27. In his extraordinary brief paper "Medusa's Head," Sigmund Freud uses this Greek myth as an occasion to defamiliarize the family and the pleasures of sexuality at once. Contemplating the "horrifying decapitated head of Medusa," Freud first associates it with the fear of castration: "To decapitate = to castrate." He then proceeds to make a further linkage: Medusa terrifies because she links castration to "the *sight* of something" (emphasis added). Freud reminds us that castration fear is specifically a *male* fear, a fear that the *boy* feels; zeroing in on an even more specific target, Freud says that it is "the boy who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration" who is made to acknowledge castration. He acknowledges it because he is made to experience most overpoweringly the *fear* of it. This fear is a profound comeuppance that shatters his unbelief: he "catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother." Presumably, this once unbelieving boy is now wholly, utterly, a believer; crucially, the source of this fear is *essentially* his mother. See Freud, "Medusa's Head," *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, 24 vols. (1953–74; repr., London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1993), 18:273–74. (This paper was posthumously published in 1940 but dated as having been written in 1922. "It appears," writes Freud's standard translator James Strachey, "to be a sketch for a more extensive work" [273n1]).
28. Feeling pity for Carrie and remorse after her participation in the early "plug it up, plug it up!" humiliation of her, Sue Snell gets her boyfriend Tommy to take Carrie to the prom, "to help her." She is a significant author figure, though a failed one:

- powerless to stop the revenge plot even though she discovers it seemingly in the nick of time, she is forced to watch her redemptive narrative going hopelessly awry. Her good intentions leave limitless evil behind.
29. Pauline Kael, "The Curse," in *When the Lights Go Down*, by Pauline Kael (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1980), 208–12.
 30. The contributions of Paul Hirsch, the official editor of *Carrie* and numerous De Palma films, should not be discounted, but De Palma appears to have taken a particularly active hand in the editorial process of composing *Carrie*. For instance, he revealed that, to create the split-screen sequence, "I spent six weeks myself cutting it together. I had one hundred and fifty set-ups, trying to get this thing together. I put it all together and it lasted five minutes and it was just too complicated. Also, you lost a lot of visceral punch from full-screen action. Then my editor and I proceeded to pull out of the split-screen and use it just when we precisely needed it." See the 1977 De Palma interview with Mike Childs and Alan Jones, "De Palma Has the Power!" collected in *Brian De Palma: Interviews*, ed. Laurence F. Knapp (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2003), 42.
 31. As Rafferty observes in his discussion of *The Fury*, its "narrative is delirious, out of control, but its horror is rigorous, with the unexpected formal correspondence of a collage." See Terence Rafferty, *The Thing Happens: Ten Years of Writing about the Movies* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 58.
 32. Thomas Doherty describes the art direction in the *Alien* films, as "abstract genital," simultaneously "penile and uterine." See Doherty, "Genre, Gender, and the Aliens Trilogy," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 181–99.
 33. See note 33.
 34. Peretz, *Becoming Visionary*, 18.
 35. Mrs. White emerges here as a female version of what Slavoj Žižek, parsing Lacan, describes as "the obscene and revengeful figure of the Father-of-Enjoyment," "split between cruel revenge and crazy laughter." Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 23.
 36. Herman Melville, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*, ed. John Bryant (1846; repr., New York: Penguin, 1996), 26.

Chapter 4

1. See Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930–1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).
2. Robert Lang, *American Film Melodrama: Griffith, Vidor, Minnelli* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 8.
3. See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, and the Mode of Excess* (1976; repr., New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 4, 28–36.
4. In her lucid study of *The Silence of the Lambs*, Yvonne Tasker writes of the film as that rarity, the female rites of passage film. "It is also very much a woman's picture, in both that genre's gothic and contemporary manifestations. . . . The women's films of the 1940s were organized around a clash, and typically a choice, between the protagonist's career, or perhaps her independence, and the possibilities

of romance . . . The woman's film . . . should not be simply mapped onto either melodrama or the domestic. Yet in almost all its versions, the woman's picture involves romance, something that *The Silence of the Lambs* seems to deliberately lay to one side." The family themes of *Silence* make it an example of that category of the woman's film the melodrama, in my view, but it is important to note the capaciousness of the category of the woman's film genre, as critics like Tasker remind us to do. The *Alien* films, much like *Silence*, reanimate woman's films' themes by intermixing them with those of other genres. Tasker, *The Silence of the Lambs* (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 23–24.

5. The woman's film that most dramatically foregrounds transformation is the Bette Davis classic *Now, Voyager*. Irving Rapper's 1942 film, in which a frumpy, insecure New England spinster, Charlotte Vale (Bette Davis), tyrannized by her cold, domineering mother, transforms, with the help of a psychiatrist, Dr. Jaquith (Claude Rains), into a strong, independent, attractive woman, foregrounds many of the issues that will circulate, in a horror-genre reformulation, in the *Alien* films.
6. Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Norton, 1988), 48.
7. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. Mary Eagleton (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 22–28.
8. I refer to the European suitors of American women in such films as *Now, Voyager* (1942) and *Summertime* (1955).
9. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 106. Žižek builds upon Raymond Bellour's famous discussion of oedipal politics in Hitchcock. In his analysis of *The Birds*, Bellour focuses more specifically on the heterosexual couple's formation, a construction that is for him the *telos* of the Hitchcock film generally; see Bellour, *The Analysis of Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). Žižek's emphasis, though, is on the oedipal family, specifically on the "maternal superego" of Lydia Brenner, played by Jessica Tandy in the film and another in the long line of Hitchcock's controlling, neurotic mother figures. Yet this film, perhaps the first in Hitchcock's canon to do so, effects a kind of healing reconciliation between the mother and the symbolic daughter (Tippi Hedren's initially vain and shallow, finally ennobled and shattered Melanie Daniels).
10. Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
11. Thomas Doherty describes the art direction in the *Alien* films, as "abstract genital," simultaneously "penile and uterine," in his essay "Genre, Gender, and the Aliens Trilogy," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 181–200, quotes from page 196.
12. I am quoting from the scene in Woolf's novel *Between the Acts* in which Giles spots a snake trying to eat a frog: "Couched in the grass, curled in an olive ring, was a snake. Dead? No, choked with a toad in its mouth. The snake was unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die. A spasm made the ribs contract; blood oozed. It was birth the wrong way round—a monstrous inversion. So, raising his foot, he stamped on them . . . it was action. Action relieved him." See Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (1941; repr., New York: HBJ, 1969), 99.

13. Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ed. Robert Con Davis and Robert Scheifler (1976; repr., New York: Longman, 1989).
14. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
15. For a discussion of the effete Englishman, see Paraic Finnerty, "The Englishman in America: Masculinity in *Love and Death on Long Island* and *Father of Frankenstein*," *Genders* 51 (June 1, 2010): <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+Englishman+in+America%3A+masculinity+in+Love+and+Death+on+Long...-a0225589049> (accessed January 3, 2011).
16. For a more expansive examination of American constructions of Europeans as decadent, see my book *Men Beyond Desire: Manhood, Sex, and Violation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), particularly chapter 2.
17. See, for example, Niall Richardson, "Effeminophobia, Misogyny and Queer Friendship: The Cultural Themes of Channel 4's *Playing It Straight*," *Sexualities* 12, no. 4 (2009): 525–44. For a study of the development of queer and homophobic associations with effeminacy, see Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
18. Many discussions of the cyborg as queer allegory have been conducted in the wake of Donna J. Haraway's pioneering *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1990). See, for example, Dennis Carlson, "Gay, Queer, and Cyborg: The Performance of Identity in a Transglobal Age," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 22, no. 3 (2001): 297–309. I have recently explored this theme in greater depth in *Gender and Sexuality in Star Trek: Allegories of Desire in the Television Series and Films* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009).
19. Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (1984; repr., Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 164–200, quotes from page 199.
20. See Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960; repr., New York: Dell, 1966), 179–214.
21. Freud, Sigmund, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, 24 vols. (1953–74; repr., London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1993), 21:230–31.
22. Caleb Crain discusses the critique of shipboard sodomy in Melville's *White-Jacket*. "The act of [same-sex] sodomy implied coercion and submission" in the nineteenth century; "it was undemocratic." What bothers Melville about shipboard life is that "there is no redress for male rape . . . The victim of male rape is somehow disqualified as a citizen; he is not acceptable as a plaintiff, and therefore justice is impossible . . . Like female victims of rape, these plaintiffs are blamed for the crime." See Caleb Crain, "Lovers of Human Flesh: Homosexuality and Cannibalism in Melville's Novels," *American Literature* 66, no. 1 (March 1994): 16.
23. Vivian Sobchack's reading of this scene as a misogynistic reduction of smart, capable Ripley to sex object is a representative one; see her essay "The Virginity of Astronauts: Sex and the Science Fiction Film," in *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (London: Verso, 1990), 103–15.

24. I refer to the metaphorical import of Ripley having put Jonesy—her pussycat—in his hypersleep chamber before discovering the Alien on the shuttle. Robin Wood makes a similar point.
25. Different versions of the myth split up Persephone's times on Earth and in hell differently; in the Homeric version, Persephone spends two-thirds of the year with her mother, one-third with Hades.
26. See Constance Penley, "Time Travel, Primal Scene, Critical Dystopia," in *Close Encounters: Film, Feminism, and Science Fiction*, ed. Penley et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 63–83, quote from page 73.
27. See, for example, Amy Taubin's essay "The Alien Trilogy" for her reading of *Alien 3* as a queer allegory. "The Alien Trilogy from Feminism to AIDS," in *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 93–100.
28. For a discussion of the butch dyke in film, including the Vasquez character, see Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), in particular in the chapter "A Rough Guide to Butches on Film," 175–231.
29. Catherine Constable, "Becoming the Monster's Mother: Morphologies of Identity in the *Alien* Series," in *Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (New York: Verso, 1999), 173–202, quote from page 186.
30. *Ibid.*, 180–81.
31. At the climax, the alien woman holds the soldier she loves, who has reverted back to his non-Avatar, human form. It is a remarkable moment, the male looking small and pitifully vulnerable in the immense young alien woman's maternal embrace. Given how utterly devoid of sexuality *Avatar* is, one might argue that this scene evokes what lies at the thematic center of the film, a deep longing for mother. The other resonant scene, in which Sigourney Weaver's scientist character dies and joins the mother-tree's web of consciousness, similarly evokes this powerful theme.
32. Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, 28.
33. Freud. "Medusa's Head," *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, 24 vols. (1953–74; repr., London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1993), 18:273–74.
34. The backstory of laurel leaves given in the Ovidian version of the myth of Apollo and Daphne is itself a narrative of female sexual ambivalence and also a classical rape scene, albeit a foiled one. As the nymph Daphne desperately eludes the charging advances of the god Apollo, his own desire enflamed by Cupid's arrow, she calls upon her father for help. She is turned into the laurel tree; Apollo then uses the leaves of the tree as a personal symbol. Though there are many ways to read this myth, I would argue that Apollo continues to exploit Daphne in another form, even if he fails to conquer her sexually.
35. As Mary Ayers writes about the role mother-infant attachment plays in shame, "When the maternal intrapsychic conflicts that influence the mother-infant relationship become impingements that in turn become a pattern, the details of the way in which the impingement is sensed by the infant are significant, as well as the infant's reaction to them." The ways in which a child can respond

- to such emotional abandonment are myriad, and gender and culture will shape the response. See Ayers, *Mother-Infant Attachment and Psychoanalysis: The Eyes of Shame* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2003), 76–77.
36. The semen imagery in subsequent films usually signifies disgust and violence (cf. when the serial killer Multiple Miggs vilely flings his ejaculate at the heroine in *The Silence of the Lambs*) or comic, embarrassing waste (cf. the moment when Cameron Diaz puts Ben Stiller's emission into her own hair in *There's Something about Mary*, as well as numerous moments in gross-out teen comedies like *American Pie*).
 37. Jenkins, in an article written with Matthew Weise, discusses the ways in which the video game *Aliens Versus Predator 2* faithfully adapts *Aliens* by allowing a player to be one of the Colonial Marines. The legacy of the film, then, dishearteningly centers on its militarism rather than on its mythic feminine themes. Matthew Weise and Henry Jenkins, "Short Controlled Bursts: Affect and Aliens," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 3 (Spring 2009): 111–16.

Chapter 5

1. See Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 233.
2. For a fuller discussion of the Gumb character, see chapter 3, Greven, *Manhood in Hollywood from Bush to Bush* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).
3. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 233.
4. Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 180.
5. The genre-hybridic quality of the films of this post-postmodern era comes through in numerous ways, among them their simultaneously throwback and hypercontemporary sensibilities, as evinced by the style and tone of horror remakes such as Zach Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) and the Will Smith vehicle *I Am Legend* (2007), from the Richard Matheson novel of the same name that was the source material for film versions starring classical-Hollywood stalwarts Vincent Price and Charlton Heston, respectively. As the jokey irony of the postmodern horror film has ceded to a new, adamant earnestness, the films also flaunt their cinematic knowingness, thereby undermining their apparent sincerity. Horror has become a cultural code that infiltrates so many films and television programs being currently made—ranging from neo-vigilante rape-revenge flicks like *The Brave One* (2007, and discussed in the Coda) to police-forensic dramas like *CSI*, *Criminal Minds*, and *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*—that it has come to serve as the template for all genre productions.
6. Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).
7. My book in process, *Negative Images: Hitchcock, De Palma, Scorsese, and Friedkin*, elaborates on these themes.
8. Diana Fuss, "Oral Incorporations: *The Silence of the Lambs*," in *Identification Papers: Readings on Psychoanalysis, Sexuality, and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 83–107.

9. Linda Williams, "When the Woman Looks," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 15–34.
10. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*.
11. Masochism has emerged as a crucial aspect of feminist film theory of the past two decades, especially in the work of Clover, Kaja Silverman, Tania Modleski, and Gaylyn Studlar. This is especially significant given the focus on narcissism in Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze; the economy of masochism has emerged as an important form of rebuttal to Mulvey's theory. In Studlar's *In the Realm of Pleasure*, she challenges Mulvey's theory of the male gaze of the classical Hollywood cinema, arguing that, far from sharing in the screen protagonist's narcissistic omnipotence, the viewer is placed, along with him, in a position of masochistic subservience similar to that of the preoedipal child in relation to the mother. See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (New York: New York University Press, 1999); Gaylyn Studlar, *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005).
12. Some have even argued that it was Grant's use of the word here that made "gay" a slang term for homosexual.
13. Freud's essay "Fetishism," is collected in *The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents and Other Works, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, 24 vols. (1953–74; repr., London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis), 21:149–59.
14. Critics associated with what has been termed "Grand Theory"—a critical approach to film that fuses Althusserian Marxism with Lacanian psychoanalysis—such as Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz, and Laura Mulvey have theorized about the narcissistic nature of film spectatorship. These "Apparatus Critics"—so called because of their interest in the cinematic apparatus itself—argue that film returns the spectator to an infantile, imaginary narcissistic state.
15. See Marcia Ian's study of the cultural history of the psychoanalytic model of the phallic mother, *Remembering the Phallic Mother: Psychoanalysis, Modernism, and the Fetish* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).
16. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 215.
17. *Ibid.*, 222.
18. "I take this double silence—silence about masochism and silence about identification with the female—as evidence that something crucial to the system of cultural representation is at stake. That something," Clover argues, "must be the operation whereby female figures are made to stand for, and act out, a psychosexual posture that knows no sex, but which for a variety of reasons that add up to male dominance, is routinely disassociated from the male. It is, in short, an operation which insures that men can eat their psychosexual cake and have it too: experience the pain/pleasure of (say) a rape fantasy by identifying with the victim, and then disavow their personal stake on grounds that the visible victim was, after all, a woman,

- and that they as spectators are 'naturally' represented by the visible male figures; male saviors or male rapists, but manly men however you cut it." *Ibid.*, 227–28.
19. Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* (1971; repr., New York: Zone Books, 1991).
 20. Louise J. Kaplan, *Cultures of Fetishism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 26–27.
 21. *Ibid.*, 28.
 22. The term “queer monster” is, for critics like Harry M. Benshoff, a controversial one. He writes, “While the notion of the monster queer or sexual outlaw holds a great counter-hegemonic force for social and semantic change, it is concomitantly the same stance which opponents of gay and lesbian civil rights invoke to demonize that cause . . . The monster queer may be a sexy, alluring, politically progressive figure to some, while to others, enmeshed in a more traditional model of monsters and normality, s/he is still a social threat which must be eradicated.” See Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1997), 256.
 23. For a helpful summary of this transitional period, see Suzanna Danuta Walters, *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
 24. I take it as indicative of the general understanding of Clarice as a lesbian heroine that the conservative Hitchcock critic Lesley Brill must go to such lengths to deny the validity of such a reading in his essay “Hitchcockian Silence: *Psycho* and Jonathan Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs*,” in *After Hitchcock: Influence, Imitation, and Intertextuality*, ed. David Boyd and R. Barton Palmer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 31–47.
 25. See Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).
 26. For a discussion of *The Silence of the Lambs* as a woman’s film as well as a female rite-of-passage narrative, see Yvonne Tasker, *The Silence of the Lambs* (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 23–24.
 27. One shot exemplifies the reassurance of phallic womanhood: Clarice opens her jacket and traces the gun in her pants with her finger once she determines that the man she is interviewing is actually the serial killer Jame Gumb. Ostensibly, Clarice is making sure the safety is off on her weapon, but the shot also serves to confirm that this action heroine is the properly phallic woman.
 28. This theme of the exchange of contraband queer knowledge informs the collection *Pages Passed from Hand to Hand: The Hidden Tradition of Homosexual Literature in English from 1748 to 1914*, ed. David Leavitt and Mark Mitchell (New York: Mariner Books, 1998).
 29. Two studies that address the issue of gay male spectatorship are Brett Farmer’s *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Male Spectatorships* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000) and Michael DeAngelis, *Gay Fandom and Crossover Stardom: James Dean, Mel Gibson, and Keanu Reeves* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001). Chapter 4 of Farmer’s book is a valuable discussion of gay male sexuality in relation to maternal desire. See also Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota

- Press, 1993), 17–39. The chief emphasis, however, in most studies of gay male or, for that matter, straight male identification is usually placed on the ways in which males identify with other males; see, for example, Robert Lang’s *Masculine Interests* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) as well.
30. Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 184.
 31. Ibid.
 32. In the words of Judith Fetterley, the woman reader is often “co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded; she is asked to identify with a selfhood that defines itself in opposition to her; she is required to identify against herself,” cited in Jonathan Culler’s 1982 *On Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 51–52. See also Fetterley’s *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).
 33. Brill, “Hitchcockian Silence.”
 34. It should be noted that Demme made the Hitchcockian thriller *The Last Embrace* in 1979, that there are odd Hitchcockian resonances in his 1986 *Something Wild*, and that the 2002 *The Truth about Charlie* is a pastiche of a Hitchcock pastiche, Stanley Donen’s 1962 *Charade*.
 35. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923; repr., New York: Doubleday, 1951), 73.
 36. Compare with the ending of John Carpenter’s original *Halloween* (1978): The Shape that has been stalking the heroine, Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis), despite seemingly having been killed by the psychiatrist, Dr. Loomis (Donald Pleasance), disappears, his evil as well as his body uncontainable.
 37. The Jason character has emerged as a potent persona in popular culture, whose cultural afterlife in novels, comic books, computer games astonishes.
 38. See Hélène Cixous’s 1976 essay “Castration or Decapitation?” in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ed. Robert Con Davis and Robert Scheifler (New York: Longman, 1989), 488–90.
 39. See Freud. “Medusa’s Head,” *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, 24 vols. (1953–74; repr., London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1993), 18:273–74.
 40. A reader might begin to wonder if paying such close attention to images in a film as schlocky as *Friday the 13th Part II* is worth the trouble. The late, great Robin Wood would dismiss this series of films from history itself, to say nothing of criticism: “The entire *Friday the 13th* series fully deserves to go, with Jason, to hell.” But it must be considered that this series of films is by far the most successful of all horror-film franchises, and also one with decades-spanning second and third and fourth lives on television repeats, video, and DVD releases. Though infrequently afforded a sustained treatment, these films demand attention. See Wood, “Foreword: ‘What Lies Beneath?’” in *Horror Film and Psychoanalysis: Freud’s Worst Nightmare*, ed. Stephen Jay Schneider (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), xviii.
 41. See Paul Morrison’s book *The Explanation for Everything: Essays on Sexual Subjectivity* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 72.

42. I refer to *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: The Classic Regency Romance—Now with Ultraviolent Zombie Mayhem!* by Jane Austen and her canny and shameless reviser, Seth Grahame-Smith (Quirk Books, 2009). I want to tip my hat to my honors thesis student Lucy Bryan for enlightening me about the extent to which this and other horror “mash-ups” of Austen blunt and distort her feminist messages, especially about the necessity of female education and her themes of female authorship.
43. Williams finds fault with Clover’s broad generalizations of the horror genre and occasional misrepresentations of a film’s particular plot: “The *Friday the 13th* films are not entirely identical; despite the repetitive elements, there are some significant differences. Clover’s analysis elevates the Final Girl into a rigid model . . . It is only after 1986 that heroines really survive, due to historical factors that Clover ignores. This era saw a growing revelation of cases of child abuse and dysfunctional families, giving the lie to the Reagan family dream . . . Later versions of the *Friday the 13th*, *Halloween*, and *Nightmare on Elm Street* emphasized the role of dysfunctional families.” See Tony Williams, “Trying to Survive on the Darker Side: 1980s Family Horror,” in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 164–80, citations from pages 170–71.
44. What the phallic mother represents, ultimately, is the “end of contradiction and the end of ambivalence,” since she is not two, but one, the mother who “inseminates and lactates.” The phallic mother is “neither hermaphrodite nor androgyne, human nor monster, because she is emphatically Mother.” See Ian, *Remembering the Phallic Mother*, 8–9.
45. I discuss the newly developed genre of the double-protagonist film, as I so name it, in chapter 4 of my book *Manhood in Hollywood from Bush to Bush*.
46. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Deerslayer* (1841; repr., New York: Penguin, 1987), 441.
47. See Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 503.
48. Catherine Constable, “Becoming the Monster’s Mother: Morphologies of Identity in the *Alien* Series,” in *Alien Zone II: The Spaces of Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (New York: Verso, 1999), 186.
49. Freud discussed homosexual narcissism in several works, but perhaps the signature discussion occurs in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). See Freud, *A Case of Hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality and Other Works, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, 24 vols. (1953–74; repr., London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1993), 7:125–249.
50. Teresa De Lauretis, “Habit Changes. *Response*,” in *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, ed. Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 329–30.
51. Andrew Britton made the point about horror movies and community in the early 1980s, and Carol Clover extended his points in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*. Britton stressed the absolute predictability and ritualistic nature of the horror film (especially the slasher) as key to its success with audiences; it should be noted that Britton was taking quite a critical stance in this essay against “Reaganite

- entertainment.” Clover challenged that the very qualities Britton took such a critical stand against are characteristic of orally performed literature throughout the Western tradition as well as in the Third World. See Britton, “Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment,” *Movie* 31/32 (1986): 1–7. This essay is also collected in the reader *Britton on Film: The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2009). See Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, 9n13.
52. To be sure, the horror genre itself refuses this closure, as the resolution achieved is scrambled in the last few seconds of these films—the denouement’s denouement—but a strong case could be made that the last few seconds belong, textually, to the *next* film in the series that they spawn, rather than to the narrative we have just seen and from which we have been released.
 53. See the chapter on *Alien Resurrection* in C. Jason Smith and Ximena Gallardo C.’s excellent study *Alien Woman: The Making of Lt. Ellen Ripley* (New York: Continuum, 2004). They do not, however, address the issue of the Newborn’s sexual identity and transgendered body.
 54. What is particularly striking about *Alien Resurrection*’s lesbian refiguring of Ripley, especially in her new role as the annihilator of queerness, is her status as masculinized, homoerotic Christ figure in the extraordinary, queer-toned *Alien 3* (1992), directed by David Fincher. For a reading of *Alien 3* as a queer-AIDS allegory, see Amy Taubin’s essay “The *Alien* Trilogy from Feminism to AIDS,” in *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 93–100.
 55. David Greven, “Throwing Down the Gauntlet: Defiant Women, Decadent Men, and *Witchblade*,” in *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*, ed. Sherrie A. Innes (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 149.
 56. No less than any other Finalizing Woman, Clarice comforts the spectator with her fetishistic phallic power, but her destruction of Gumb, while it temporarily restores order, refuses the heterosexual closure of the Final Girl in other films, such as *Friday the 13th, Part II*. Far from creating in Gumb a better, more erotically driven and therefore normative male, or falling into Lecter’s waiting cannibalistic embrace, Clarice is left suspended between worlds, the embodiment of patriarchal law and an unmoored, questioning subject with an uncertain future and a dubious legacy. Demme’s film remains remarkable for its refusals of sexual normativity, even as it stages a battle between queer opponents that depends on the destruction of the queer male.

As such, *The Silence of the Lambs* allegorically represented shifts in national queer life. The comparatively more normative, assimilated lesbian character struggles to become a recognized and honored member of the social order, to be sanctified by the law, embodied here by both the FBI and psychiatry. Her struggle and its vividness obscure the deeper one at work in the film, between an assimilationist model of queer sexuality and a defiant, in-your-face, socially disruptive one. In some ways this struggle occurs between an older form of homosexuality (the show tunes—quoting Hannibal Lecter) and a new “queer” form of sexual and gendered identity, Gumb’s indeterminate, collage masculinity (combining the hetero-masculine, the gay, the queer, the cross-dressing, the fetishist). In the ways in which

Gumb represents a male subjectivity so perplexing as to be unthinkable, his characterization allegorizes, specifically, social fears of the transgendered body. Indeed, the film explodes allegory, presenting Gumb explicitly as a failed transsexual, denied sexual reassignment surgery because of his violent proclivities. Given the real-life debates that have been waged in the gay community regarding the “place” for transgendered identities, the internecine struggles even among queers over transgender rights, *Silence* was a prophetic film indeed.

57. Isabel Cristina Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 71.

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