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KNOWING, LOVING, AND BEING THROUGH EXCESS: CREATION OF SUBJECT IN BERTHA HARRIS'S *LOVER*

by

KRISTIN BRUCKNER

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English
Department of Literature and Languages

Annett Jessop, Ph.D., Committee Chair

College of Arts and Sciences

The University of Texas at Tyler
May 2019

The University of Texas at Tyler
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Abstract

CREATION OF SUBJECT IN BERTHA HARRIS'S *LOVER*: MEDUSA, MIMESIS, AND ARTISTIC EXCESS TO RENOUNCE FRAGMENTATION

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May 2019

This article is a psychoanalytic and feminist reading of Bertha Harris's novel *Lover,* a text that deserves wider critical scrutiny and close reading for the theoretical implications it initiates. The novel presents an understanding of what it means to be both a woman and a lover, and it indicates the ways that these two ideas are intertwined. Although it was written in 1976, *Lover* portrays innovative feminist performances of subject which remain relevant to contemporary feminist readers. The subject this novel envisions is one who is able to enact a seduction that was unavailable to traditional conceptions of self under the dominant framework of Western culture. This article considers how the novel deploys twins and mirrors to complicate the process of mimesis and delves into the symbolism implied by the novel's references to Medusa, Saint Veronica, and the Hemorrhissa—the biblical woman who was healed of an issue of blood by Christ. In this article, the author takes into account the novel's negotiation of the fear and horror associated with the female body through postmodern artistic parody and excess. This article finds that *Lover* presents a version of self that is created by the process of reflection and artistic creation. Through its interaction with the nexuses at which artistic creation and sexuality intersect with both Greek and Christian myths, this novel reassembles a vision of what it means to be a woman.

CHAPTER ONE

OBSERVATION: THE LOVER KNOWS HER WORLD

Introduction

Bertha Harris's 1976 novel *Lover* tells the adventurous story of a community of lesbians who unite to teach one of their own to become a lover in every sense of the word. By healing Flynn and showing her how to cherish the various aspects of herself, these characters show readers that by embracing creative potential, women can find a way to remain whole and inscribe their subjectivity in a dangerous world—a world in which dividing and dissecting both the female body and the female psyche are authorized and endorsed by religious and philosophical traditions. Although the novel is focused on the experiences of a lesbian who learns to love, the themes in this book apply to any reader interested in understanding the human experience of finding oneself and realizing one's potential, whether that be as a lesbian, as a woman, or as a lover. It accomplishes this by showing readers how to embrace the creative impulse to guide the formation of self and an understanding of the world.

Written in 1976, *Lover* fully embodies the shifting aesthetic sensibilities evident in the turn from modernist to postmodernist literature. As such, the book is a daring departure from the norms of realist literature: the characters make unexpected appearances and transformations, time refuses linear organization, the narration drifts from third to first person and back again without warning, and the events of plot are tricky to discern. However, *Lover* gives readers a hint about how to make sense of these rollicking adventures when it makes an intertextual reference to Lewis Carroll's work

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. One of Flynn's students tells Flynn, ". . . *drink me*— but I don't mean anything dirty by that, it's what I read in a book. You grow up or down" (184). *Lover* has been ignored by mainstream readers for decades, and few critics have delved into its subversive potential. Susan Rubin Suleiman's book *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* includes postmodernist fiction like *Lover* in the category of avant-garde. Sulieman's chapter "Aggressions and Counteraggressions: Readability in Avant-Garde Fiction" is an exploration of how fiction that shrugs off realist conventions relying on the intelligibility of texts involves assuming an aggressive posture. She writes, "When faced with the aggression of such a text, it is hardly any wonder if the first reaction of a reader is one of defensive counterattack: the text is called unreadable, that is to say both unintelligible and not worth reading" (36). The reader's defensive reaction to postmodernist texts is to be expected, given the fact that postmodernism involves a subversion of norms reflecting fundamental cultural notions, especially the linear organization of time, stability of identity, and traceable relationship from cause to effect. These postmodern techniques are an important part of what makes this novel subversive and thus establish its radical potential.

Harris made a daring choice when she wrote *Lover* as a radical departure from mainstream literature. Catherine R. Stimpson's article "Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English," discusses the neglect of *Lover* from critics and mainstream readers alike. She writes, "Harris has been called inaccessible . . .. She is, therefore supposedly ideologically unsound" (378) because readers uninitiated in the tactics of surrealist writing may struggle with the text. Stimpson goes on to note that Harris has an answer for the accusation that her text is too difficult: "[Harris] believes that the feminist and lesbian press still lacks an informed criticism to mediate between texts and a large audience" (378). Certainly, *Lover* was ahead of its time. This is a novel that takes readers through the looking glass into an alternate realm where one learns to use artistic expression to admire and accept the self and become both the lover and the beloved. Bertha Harris shows readers how unconventional literature can create characters with the strength to overcome centuries of patriarchal oppression and create new patterns and definitions of community and self. In the years since *Lover's* publication, the work of French feminism, especially the theories of Luce Irigaray have buttressed the tactics Harris employs. For this reason, it merits greater attention from contemporary feminist critics. The novel deserves to be revisited and re-interpreted, as it is representative of key late twentieth-century feminist aesthetic theories. Its narrative strategies present readers with excesses—overabundances of appetite, character, and creative drive. This surplus generates a possibility which bears the potential to jam the mechanisms of phallologic discourses by embracing the mythic roots of the creative self and creating space for a new understanding of the feminine self as subject through its playful presentation of twins, reflections, artifice, parody, and repetitions.

This project will utilize feminist critical theory along with psychoanalytic criticism to delve into the ways in which *Lover* understands the wisdom that bolsters formation of fully realized, active subjecthood. The novel shows readers that becoming a lover and becoming a whole self are two sides of the same task—they mirror one another; knowledge of the world in which one exists, an understanding of the self, and an appreciation for how to enact one's vision are the three layers of knowing which the novel presents as the means to become a lover. Fully understanding all three levels creates the situation in which one can begin to understand who woman is and what she is able to achieve. This is the overarching structure which guides the organization of this project. Chapter One—Observation: The Lover Knows Her World is an analysis of the situation into which the novel was born. It describes *Lover's* critical reception and briefly touches on the understanding scholars have found in the novel thus far as they relate to the current project. Chapter One also presents a description of the problems of subjecthood for the lesbian and the woman in contemporary Western culture. Chapter Two—Substance: The Lover Knows Her Self is an examination of the dissections which have been presented by the culture in response to anxieties about the female body. The binary thinking which limits existence to the split between mind and body are found in the Medusa myth, a legend to which *Lover* makes compelling allusions. Chapter Three—Ability: The Lover Knows Seeing is Being shows readers the ways in which this novel presents artistic creation as a means of overcoming the patriarchal, heteronormative assumptions of who women are and what women can do. This new version of woman as subject is able to create a new understanding of what it means to be a lover in order to override the theories that have historically prevented women from enacting subjecthood. These chapters are a first step towards finding meaning in Harris's novel. Ideally, they will inspire other scholars to take a fresh look at this work and revisit the ways that this and other challenging texts by innovative authors can inform and enlighten feminist theory.

Lover's Reception and Relevant Criticism

"...she is writing a novel that is not a novel—to please you I guess, because you like to read." (Harris 100)

When the book was released in 1976, and when it was later reprinted in a second edition, *Lover* received a great deal of praise from critics. Many scholars have analyzed some of the implications of its distinctive format and content with commendable depth. Several critical readings have contributed to the current project, but none have taken on a close examination of the ways in which *Lover's* attention to artistic and mimetic reproduction carries the potential to form an original understanding of woman as subject.

When the book was published the first time by Daughters Publishing Company Inc., it garnered more attention than works from small publishing houses can ordinarily expect. It received positive mentions from smaller independent periodicals that focused primarily on lesbian lifestyle and political issues. *Lover* was also given more attention at the national level than its publishers had anticipated. When first published, *Lover* received praise in *The New York Times, The New York Times Review of Books, The Washington Post Book World,* and *Ms. Magazine*. Harris was invited to present at lectures, conferences, symposiums, and book readings in New York and Philadelphia. Bertha Harris's writing and teaching at New York University were celebrated, and she became a well-known and respected force in the New York feminist literary community. Negative reviews contemporary with either the first or second publication are impossible to find, discounting a brief mention in Jane Rule's 1977 review which voiced concern that some readers might be confused by the book's reference to inside jokes familiar only to literary lesbians in Harris's New York social circle and suggested the novel's violence is unenlightening.

One important area of agreement among scholars is that this novel shrugs off the conventions of realism and presents instead a uniquely postmodern text. Critics cite *Lover's* ability to override linear narrative concerns and its refusal to present timelines and characters working together to advance a plot. Amanda C. Gable's 1998 article, "Bertha Harris's *Lover:* Lesbian *and* Postmodern," attributes the scarcity of scholarly examinations of *Lover* to the confluence of its postmodern form and its lesbian content.

She suspects that the nonlinear narrative and its lack of traditional plotline meant that it was not widely read by a general audience unsettled by the confusing format—including both general readers and scholars who were interested in other feminist and lesbian books; further, the taboo against lesbian content made it less interesting to an academic reader who might have been comfortable analyzing other postmodern writing. Gable remarks that the two elements that rendered the text invisible to readers and untouchable to literary critics are the same qualities it uses to create a sense of lesbian community among the characters.

Other scholars have also noted that the novel creates an unconventional community. Laura Christine Godfrey's article "Creating a Nonpatriarchal Lineage in Bertha Harris's *Lover*" finds that the martyrs and saints in the italicized chapter epigraphs unite with the characters of the novel to form a community. She also outlines the ways in which *Lover* reinvents the mother/daughter relationship. This interrupts the patriarchal family's emphasis on reproduction and the maintenance of paternal lineage as the chief aims of family life and refocuses the purpose of familial bonds instead as a source of nurturing and affection. Carolyn Allen focused on the creation of new possibilities for lesbian relationships in fiction in her book *Following Djuna: Women Lovers and the Erotics of Loss*. According to Allen, Harris's work is an obvious next step in the portrayal of relationships between women. Allen contrasts Barnes's attention to couples with Harris's community of women whose relation to one another is constantly in flux and notices the possibilities and liberations that exist in the larger communities. The discussions around *Lover's* ability to reimagine the realities of women's relationships are important, as the formation of community is a key aspect of the novel. However, the work of these critics has failed to notice that nontraditional relationships are only made possible when an unorthodox conception of self allows access to the benefits available through reimagined friendships and family relationships.

Lover's position in the tradition of lesbian novels is a compelling angle from which to understand the themes in this work, and it is an idea many critics have examined. Most scholars agree that *Lover* is directly descended from other women writers who used writing as a way to explore gender and sexuality in a way that the dominant culture would not condone. The earliest scholarship on the novel, Stimpson's article "Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English," mentioned in the preceding section, recognizes *Lover* as a significant text in the canon of lesbian literature and cemented the novel's importance. She acknowledges that the lesbian difference was interpreted as deviance since lesbian love defied the norms of polite society. In more recent lesbian fiction, including *Lover,* Stimpson sees the outlines of a new pattern emerging. Observing Harris's comedic ability to play on the stigma that had once damned other lesbian characters, Stimpson celebrates *Lover* as the most ambitious novel of this new type.

Jan Hokenson's article, "The Pronouns of Gomorrha: A Lesbian Prose Tradition," provides another way to understand Harris's relationship to lesbian canonical works, and it also delves into *Lover's* explorations of nontraditional subjecthood. Hokenson finds that the progression of great lesbian writing has trended in increasingly experimental and abstract directions. She notices the ways Woolf and Stein employed modernist techniques—including the use of codes, playful slips of meaning, and abstraction to disrupt the concept of self and subject. She finds that postmodern fiction, as exemplified in the fiction of Monique Wittig and Bertha Harris, extends this heritage of lesbian modernism and intensifies the radical techniques of the previous generation. Hokenson has had a profound influence on this project, as she acknowledges how the unsettled postmodern portrayal of self and subject allows for the creation of a new way of understanding one's existence in the world.

Another influential facet of critical commentary on this novel is the work that explores the way performance operates. Wayne Koestenbaum's enthusiastic review of *Lover,* "Excess Story—*Lover* by Bertha Harris" is a brief review that zeroes in on the novel's attention to performance, and he characterizes *Lover* as a vaudeville enactment of queer theory. In her article "Starting from Snatch: The Seduction of Performance in Bertha Harris's *Lover*," Victoria Smith takes a closer look at how the performances in the novel operate. She concludes that *Lover* emphasizes key aspects of the nature of performance: the theatrical relationship between actor and audience, linguistic acts, as well as the erotic enactment of a seduction of the reader. This nuanced understanding of performance in *Lover* leads Smith to conclude that the novel creates a situation in which the meaning created by performance is both a subversion of the phallocentric understanding of subjectivity as well as the construction of a new understanding of subject as performer. Victoria Smith's article references Irigaray's complication of Freud's theory of hysteria as a failed mirroring of masculinity, concluding that art and performance are the forces by which characters in *Lover* succeed in pulling the female self from the oblivion of a failed copy of man and into the role of active, creative agent.

Another critic who considers the connections between *Lover* and French feminist theories is Sally Robinson in her article "The 'Anti-Logos Weapon': Multiplicity in Women's Texts." Robinson examines the ways in which three novels, including *Lover*, align with the ideology of Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva. She argues that *Lover* is an embodiment of the theories of French feminism, as the novel delights in disruption of traditional narrative forms and embraces experimentation with representation. Robinson provides an exploration of how *Lover* subverts the function of character and effectively rejects realism's male-centered quest for unity between signified and language. Robinson mentions the radical potential of multiplicity, but she does not explore specific ways in which this excess creates disruption in *Lover.*

Although the scholarship thus far on Bertha Harris's novel has made insightful claims about the importance of this work, there is still plenty of room to explore how *Lover's* avant-garde sensibilities function; further, more study warranted in order to explore how the novel's implications function within the lens of feminist critical theory. Several scholars have noted that this text presents an opportunity to destabilize patriarchal norms around what it means to be a woman and a feminist, yet little has been done to understand the ways in which reflection, excess, and mimicry have functioned in building identity in *Lover.* Reading this novel in concert with French feminist Luce Irigaray—who theorized that women could create texts capable of overriding dangerous and stifling phallological discourses—creates a framework through which readers can better understand the subversive potential of Harris's novel. A more complete analysis can explore the manner in which mirroring, parody, artistic creation, and forgery work together in *Lover* to destabilize and override the patriarchal and heteronormative understandings of identity and desire; these forces create a situation in which the female subject can emerge as an active and creative force.

Woman and Lesbian as Subject

"Whatever is over there—if it can swim or walk on water—could catch him." (Harris 85)

In addition to the exploration of *avant garde* art and literature's break from convention, Suleiman's book mentioned in the introduction also digs into feminism's growing concern with understanding the subject. She notes that in the years after the publication of Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* in 1969, a new emphasis was placed on the investigation of woman as subject. Suleiman writes, "Women, who for centuries had been the *objects* of male theorizing, male desires, male fears, and male representations, had to discover and reappropriate themselves as *subjects*" (119). Women's bodies were objectified by Western culture for generations, and this objectification was echoed in the texts the culture produced and reinforced by the canonization of these representations. The goal of situating the woman as subject proved to be a complicated project, as the issue of what constitutes women's writing is inherently politically charged. This is the environment in which *Lover* was written, and so it stands to reason that the creation of the woman and lesbian subject is a chief concern of the text. In order to explain the meaning of Harris's ability to create and explore a new understanding of the female subject, one must first understand why this gesture is an important step. By gaining an understanding of the forces that controvert the possibility of woman as subject in Western discourse, readers can more fully appreciate the radical shift which *Lover* is able to exert.

Luce Irigaray is a French feminist theorist and philosopher who has wrestled with the assumptions that underlie understandings of what it means to be a woman in a world that was created by and for men. The question of how to conceive of the woman as subject is among the more prominent themes explored in Luce Irigaray's book, *Speculum* *of the Other Woman.* Irigaray investigates and challenges the patriarchal implications inherent in Western epistemological and metaphysical understanding of subject. She traces Western philosophy's evolution from the work of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, and Hegel, then examines the implications of Western philosophy as these formulations are interpreted through psychoanalytic theory.

Irigaray illuminates the ways in which these thinkers ignored the possibility of women-centered depictions of female experience as a basis for seeing and understanding the world with the female mind. Irigaray sums up her scrutiny of psychoanalytic interpretations of women when she writes:

> "Is it necessary to add, or repeat, that woman's 'improper' access to representation, her entry into a specular and speculative economy that affords her instincts no signs, no symbols or emblems, or methods of writing that could figure her instincts, make it possible for her to work out or transpose specific representatives of her instinctual object goals? . . . Nothing will be known about those, except perhaps in *dream.* Woman's desire can find expression only in dreams. It can never, under any circumstances, take on a 'conscious' shape." (*Speculum* 124-25)

By centering the consciousness of both men and women around the phallus, psychoanalysis denied the potential for woman to exist as anything other than a failed version of man. She finds that at their roots, these theories exclude the potential of female subjectivity. Women as subject in Western epistemology has only ever been allowed to exist as a sanctioned copy of the male subject. Irigaray notes that phallocentric discourse's method for preventing women from straying too far is to label women who overstep the boundaries as deviant and "hysterical." She writes:

> "Artifice, lie, deception, snare—these are the kinds of judgements society confers upon the tableaux, the scenes, the dramas, the pantomimes produced by the hysteric. And if woman's instincts try to command public recognition in this way, their demand and de-monstrations will be met with derision, anathema, and punishment. Or at least by belittling interpretations, appeals to common sense or to reason." (*Speculum* 125)

According to Freudian psychoanalysis, women's development of consciousness revolves around the desire to replace the missing phallus with sexual relations and later with children. Hysteria thus becomes a neurosis resulting from the failure to satisfy this desire. According to Irigaray, this phallocentric logic ignores and undermines the possibility of female expression of consciousness, erasing the possibility of the female subject.

Luce Irigaray provides some context to understand the frameworks a woman author is working against when she attempts to craft an understanding of herself as subject. Irigaray's theories explore how the woman as subject can be enacted. At the center of her book, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, is the chapter entitled "Speculum." In this chapter, nestled between the sections examining Freudian understanding of human consciousness and the exploration of Platonic epistemology, Irigaray creates the metaphor of a speculum which she uses to explore faults inherent to Western philosophy. Irigaray writes:

> "Here then, man does not yet have the plentitude of Being *within him,* but instead a whole range of theoretical tools (geometrical, mathematical, discursive, dialogic), a whole technique of philosophy and even of artistic practice, are being worked out to form a *matrix of appropriation* for man. And what he already terms 'natural' or 'more' natural is transformed—fissured, split all over again—by his speculations." (*Speculum* 151)

Western epistemology has its roots in the thinking of ancient Greek philosophers, but she deems these theories suspect since their ideas have been tainted by their biased perspective, rooted within a phallic obsession to penetrate the mysteries of nature. Irigaray's speculum is a tool which can be used to bore into and explore holes in the philosophical roots of Western thought. The speculum she imagines is also a concave mirror, calibrated to focus the rays of light and concentrate their intensity into fire. In this middle section of her book, Irigaray uses the image of the speculum to search for the phallic impulses behind the Western philosophical tradition to illuminate how its theories are built on the distinction between a perceiving (male) subject and the passive (female) object. She asks: “Which ‘subject’ has taken an interest in the anamorphoses produced by conjunction of such curvatures? What impossible reflected images, maddening reflections, parodic transformations took place at each of their transformations?” (*Speculum* 144). The failure of Western discourse to consider the validity of female consciousness is an important flaw in the theories that have served as the basis of philosophy for centuries.

The driving force behind this patriarchal urge to assert subjecthood is, according to Irigaray, based in a profound sense of fear. When the subject recognizes that it is being observed by another and recognizes that it has become the object of the attention of another—that self must concede that the interpretation of the image seen by that other beyond the control of the self. Irigaray sketches this fear thus: “That this resistance should all too often take the form of rivalry… of a death struggle between consciousnesses, does not alter the fact that at stake here somewhere. . . is the risk that the subject (as) self will crumble away” (*Speculum* 135). This might explain the fear the killer across the lake in *Lover* feels when he ponders the possibility that the women in the house might find him hiding in the weeds, watching them. He thinks, “Whatever is over there—if it can swim or walk on water—could catch him” (Harris 85). This fear of being found out, of being detected by an active and perceiving subject and being turned into an object, drives his violence—a similar fear has driven the violence against women for centuries. Irigaray is optimistic that the creation of texts in the language of the female subject will serve to give voice to the half of humanity that has been ignored by patriarchal oppression.

The work of lesbian authors, writing simultaneously as women *and* as women who exist outside the conventions of heteronormative expectations, is thus doubly problematized. Although several authors have identified the problematic search for the lesbian subject in Western discourse, Marilyn Frye's description of the lesbian subject's invisibility to patriarchal, heteronormative culture is particularly helpful. Frye explains the status of the lesbian in her book *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory.* She first points out the problems she sees with the dictionary definitions of "lesbian," finding that the term denotes women who engage in sexual relations with other women. When she checks the dictionaries to see how they define "sexual relations," she finds that sex is only sexual when it involves intimate relations between a man and a woman. Frye writes, "Speaking of women who have sex with other women is like speaking of ducks who engage in arm wrestling. When the dictionary defines lesbians as women who have sex or sexual relations with other women, it defines lesbians as logically impossible" (157-58). Frye's analysis of how an understanding which deems lesbianism to be unnatural is a deliberate attempt to maintain control over women. She writes:

> "It is also true that lesbians are in a position to see things that cannot be seen from within the system. What lesbians see makes them lesbians, and their seeing is why they have to be excluded. Lesbians are woman seers. When one is suspected of seeing women, one is spat, summarily out of reality, through the cognitive gap and into negative semantic space." (173)

Frye also notes that the connection of lesbianism to the Greek isle of Lesbos and the ancient poetry of Sappho is a considerably indirect way of describing the sexual preferences of women in the present day. Nevertheless, this idea of lesbians as the only true "seers" of women hints at a new potential for mythic possibility. This invisibility of the lesbian subject is one of the conundrums that the characters in *Lover* will highlight.

When Flynn decides to become a lover, Harris's text is able to overcome the conventional expectations for woman and lesbian as subject.

Although the erasure of the lesbian experience in mainstream culture has been extreme, it has not been absolute—especially in literature, and Bertha Harris's *Lover* is situated within a rich lineage of lesbian authors. Stimpson's article, "Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English," considers the dominant arcs of lesbian characters in fiction. She writes, "Lesbian novels in English have responded judgmentally to the perversion that has made homosexuality perverse by developing two repetitive patterns: the dying fall. . . and the enabling escape" (364). The damnation and suffering of lesbian characters in the works of authors such as Radclyffe Hall and Djuna Barnes illustrate the influence of the dominant, heteronormative culture, which dictates that lesbians are deviants whose love was doomed.

Stimpson describes the ways in which lesbian authors have chosen to escape from the conventions of a plot centered around lesbian love as a force of damnation through the use of coded texts. Jan Hokenson, the author of the article, "The Pronouns of Gomorrha: A Lesbian Prose Tradition," would agree on this point with Stimpson. She situates *Lover* within the lineage of lesbian texts in which the encryption of gender has become gradually more radical and disruptive. She writes, "if one looks closely at the prose canons of every major lesbian prose writer until about 1960, one sees a movement—not present in most other women's work—a steady movement toward abstraction" (62). Hokenson examines the work of a variety of major lesbian authors including Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, and Monique Wittig and concludes that each of them became gradually more and more abstract, both in their own work and across the genre throughout time. On this continuum, the coded pronouns of Stein would eventually become the exploded pronouns of Wittig. Hokenson agrees that in *Lover*, Harris takes this abstraction one step further when she creates the whirling identities and confusion of characters in the novel and argues that in *Lover,* "the names are all ciphers of lesbian eros fleetingly embodied in names taken from Western traditions of passion" (67)

Teresa de Laurentis is another theorist who has worked to understand how the lesbian self is created and depicted in texts. Her article "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation" is a spirited exploration of the ways in which lesbian authors have sought to "escape gender, to deny it, transcend it, or perform it in excess, and to inscribe the erotic in cryptic, allegorical, realistic, camp, or other modes of representation" (159). Citing the Women's Studies scholar Elaine Marks, de Laurentis emphasizes the liberatory potential of excess to "destroy male discourse on love and redesign the universe" (165). De Laurentis does not mention the work of Bertha Harris specifically, but her claim concerning tactics lesbian authors use to connect textual meaning to their lived experiences is enlightening. Harris's novel is an example of a text which embraces parody as a means of exhibiting an overwhelming excess to overcome heteronormative gender expectations. As such, *Lover* makes an important step in a new direction toward the creation of both a woman and lesbian as subject.

At the beginning of *Lover,* Flynn is sick and alone, and she and her sisters are traumatized by their mother's disappearance into yet another marriage to a man who takes her presence away from the girls. This illness is the situation which will eventually be eased by the end of the novel when Flynn finally realizes her true form, as a lover. However, in the first few pages, we see "Flynn, coming up from fever: I don't know if it's a dream, but knowing doesn't save me from it" (10). In her feverish dream, she sees her mother, Daisy, as a bride, and the imagery of fruitful bounty suggested by the fruits on Daisy's skirt in this scene contrasts sharply with Flynn's sensation of illness. Flynn thinks, "The grapes, apples, pomegranates once off satin and into space and air turn to real fruit; and they all hit me and I feel smothered once more" (11). The social expectations of marriage and fruitful, conjugal love between women and men become an aspect of the illness from which Flynn suffers. Flynn has been a wife and a mother, like Daisy, and these roles have failed to bring her the love and peace she eventually finds when she becomes a different sort of lover by the end of the novel. Flynn finds a way to understand her existence as a subject; this allows her to subvert the heterosexual norms that were symptomatic of her sickness.

CHAPTER TWO

SUBSTANCE: THE LOVER KNOWS HER SELF

Refusing Fragmentation

"…it will not be the scalpel; it will be art that will make all the difference…"

(Harris 87)

In order to understand what *Lover* is embracing with its postmodern presentation of excess, one needs to first take a look at what, precisely, the novel is renouncing. In this book, Flynn begins the story with the goal of becoming a brain in a jar. Detached from her body and kept alive by miraculous medical technology, she envisions her inner self freed from the facts of her bodily existence which she describes thus:

> ". . . the 'facts' were so encrusted with what she had learned to recognize as fictional topsoil that she increasingly felt the truth of herself to be some rotting Sutton Hoo or buried flint arrowhead or ruin of Troy—but a treasure—which every decade sank deeper down. This neither frightened nor depressed her. Her brain was the answer. Unleashed, her brain would be the whole truth." (67)

This split between the working of the mind and the presence of the body is an element of Western thinking which implies that the functions of the body are mundane and polluted in comparison with the working of the mind and spirit which when enlightened can overcome the filth of the body. This binary opposition between body and mind also contains gendered connotations: the mind is pure and male, and it is the active element of humanity, while the body is base and feminine, controlled by its needs and desires. Flynn is miserable in the beginning of the novel, and she hopes to uncover her true self and live on her own terms. She dreams of living as a mind freed from the needs of her physical body. She recognizes this thought is not accepted by the women around her and is nonetheless willing to accept the awfulness of this sort of existence. Flynn thinks, "I will be horrible. Horrible will control. Horrible absolute controls absolutely, so I will control.

Wonderful for me, horrible for them. . ." (53). In exchange for acceptance, Flynn is willing to gain control of truth by mastering and erasing the physicality of her self as a woman.

This dream of living as a brain without a body will require technological innovation. The working of the male/female, brain/body binary system is deeply rooted in an acceptance of science and technology as a means of controlling the natural world. Flynn bases her dream on a radio story about two enterprising scientists on the verge of an important discovery: "a head without a body, according to their theory will speak only the truth. At last the truth!" (52). Flynn accepts that the brain in a jar requires scientific knowledge. She imagines the brain machine as working via "the tubes—input, output, drainage; ready the microphone to broadcast the truth. Herself inside a roomy plexiglass box" (53). Flynn even traps rabbits and keeps them to conduct experiments in order to perfect the technology to perform the split. The dream of existing as the brain machine is the search for truth via scientific understanding.

Flynn's dream of becoming a brain machine is visionary in that it anticipates by several years Donna Haraway's essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s." In this text, Haraway explores the possibility that a re-imagining of what constitutes human—such as Flynn's brain machine, welcoming a union between the human self and encroaching scientific intervention—might support the aims of feminism. By investigating Haraway's thoughts on the constructive aspects of this union, readers can locate the impulses which make the brain machine so seductive to Flynn and get a fuller sense of what she rejects when she abandons this image. Haraway finds the progressive potential in the cyborg's ability to blur boundaries as an opportunity for women to promote their own agency against "the traditions of Western science and politics—the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as a resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other" (191). Haraway argues that the feminist potential of the cyborg lies in its existence as a "creature in a postgender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-Oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to organic wholeness" (192). Flynn's plan to become a brain machine reflects her struggle against the traditional Western narratives about the possibility for women to exist as subject, and she dreams of overcoming these narratives by severing her mind from her female body.

Readers of *Lover* are likely to agree with Samaria who tells Flynn that her aspiration to live as a brain machine is not healthy. In the end, Flynn eventually agrees and leaves this dream behind. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" explains the attraction of this notion, but Haraway herself also hints at why it might also be problematic: "The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism" (193). Although Haraway claims that the cyborg has no reason to be faithful to these origins, the fact remains that the knowledge facilitating the cyborg possibility is grounded in the weaponization of technology. Although the novel makes no mention of these concerns, they remain valid criticisms; in the end, *Lover* gives both characters and readers a better model to replace the reliance on scientific technology. As Flynn learns how to become a lover, she moves away from her dream of living as a brain machine, and she embraces a healthier version of self that does not require her brain to be severed from the rest of her body and thinks, ". . . it will not be the scalpel; it will be art that will make all the difference. . ." (Harris 87). In the end, Flynn refuses to be decapitated.

Embracing Medusa

"They all go down to the Greek place to eat." (Harris 92)

One of the themes that makes *Lover* especially challenging for a mainstream audience is the outrageous violence that haunts its pages, particularly the italicized chapter introductions in which women often suffer grizzly torture and dismemberment. The suffering the women endure in these chapter prologues is shocking. Given the fact that these prologues do not overtly further the plot, they might be seen as profligately bloody, with no purpose other than to cause a visceral reaction in the reader, and so the urge to find meaning in these prologues is understandable. In her essay "Queer Relics: Martyrological Time and the Eroto-Aesthetics of Suffering in Bertha Harris' *Lover*," Kendra Smith discusses the role of the saintly suffering in the text. Smith considers the ways in which sainthood focused on the female body as the nexus of political, erotic, and temporal concerns, and she argues that contemporary definitions of the lesbian as a subject share congruent awareness. Martyrdom presents an opportunity for women to override a traditional, linear understanding of time, and so saints are able to exist forever in the instant of their ecstatic suffering as they are recognized and adored by worshippers. Smith suggests that since these saints become wedded to Christ, their existence becomes omnipresent in time along with God. Interestingly, her essay does not flinch from the implication that saintly suffering is justified. Instead, she reads their suffering as an erotic choice of extreme asceticism, claiming these women enacted their desires by refusing to follow the expectations of the patriarchal culture that sought their oppression and destruction. Smith's argument that the suffering these women endure in *Lover* is compelling; however, it is important to notice that in the end, Flynn's choice to become a lover and an artist is a rejection of the fate of these religious figures. Flynn declines to be carved and diced up to serve the designs of patriarchal society.

Lover's pages are brimming with vivid anecdotes about women who are targets of violence, and these attacks are often acts of sexual violence. Samaria believes she was conceived when her mother was raped by a gang of men at the shipyard where she worked when they discovered that she was a woman. Many of the women in the chapter prologues are martyred when they refuse the sexual advances of powerful men. For example:

> *"Rhipseme of Rome attracted the passions of the emperor Diocletian, a circumstance which forced her, with her friend Gaiana, to transplant their rather large community of women to Armenia. There, unfortunately, they encountered the same problem with King Tiridates: first Rhipseme repulsed him, then Gaiana. King Tiridates had the entire community put to death." (86)*

Also featured is Margaret of Antioch who was fed to a dragon after she "*refused the attention of the governor"* (42). Many of the prologues allude to sexual attacks of young girls. A striking example is Susana who was taken from her bed by her brothers and "*forced to submit to ravishment"* (104). Molestation of girls is also mentioned repeatedly within the regular text of the novel. Readers learn that the killer who lives in a van across the lake from the women's house is the same man who "raped a nine year old girl and threw her over the roof of a building" (85). Lydia Somerlyton, Flynn's beloved, recounts a story of how her mother was reminded by an article in a magazine to tell her daughter: ". . . do you remember that time you were four years old and that gorilla I'm married to sat you on his lap and went bouncy! bouncy! ride-a-cock-horse? I want you to know that's what child molesting is!" (165). Another striking example of child molestation is presented when Samaria talks about asking the man in charge of the orphanage what happened to her sister. Although he has no information about a sister, he tells Samaria about how she ended up in the orphanage after she and her mother were found:

> "in a cornfield five miles out of town in the middle of the night. She was with a man, but he got away. They were both drunken and naked. She was trying to put the man's private member inside your mouth. You were eight years old. They were laughing their heads off. You were lying on the ground, still as stone. Don't you remember anything?" (32)

These horrific accounts of sexual abuse are dropped into the text casually, as if they are everyday occurrences for these characters. Sexual violence appears to be unavoidable for the women in the world of *Lover.* This might begin to explain the discomfort Flynn feels about her daughter, Nelly, as the child grows. Flynn sees her daughter playing with a friend who appears to have a very adult understanding of sexuality. About this friend, Flynn thinks, "Her salacious tittering about underwear and bow-legged women disgusts me" (16). These thoughts bring to mind her own daughter's developing body, and Flynn's thoughts continue: "I want my daughter to be nothing but a brain kept living in a tank full of marvelous liquids. I want to call a halt to her happening breasts and pubic hair. A brain in a pure white skull, all safe" (16). Her instinct to protect her daughter is prompted by her fears about the sexual violence that haunts her world. Flynn's impulse early in the novel is to escape from the physical reality of the female body into the safety of a severed brain. Not only does this seem a viable option for herself, but it provides a means of protecting her daughter as well.

Flynn is dissatisfied with her existence as a woman; thus, she is willing to embrace not only technological monstrosity, she is also willing to accept the idea that her brain will be severed from the rest of her body. Decapitation is another theme that is repeated throughout *Lover*, both in the main text of the novel and in the italicized prologues that precede most of the chapters. For example, Samaria, Flynn's grandmother who is also Veronica's lover, is fed up with Flynn's querulousness and chastises her. Flynn compares the upbraiding she receives to "Judith decapitating Holofernes" and thinks "she is not like the guillotine" (101). This alludes to the grimly efficient device for separating the head from the body invented during the French Revolution. One of the chapter prologues mentions Barbara, whose father locked her in a tower, and "*Later, he tried to cut off her head*" (56). Additionally, we read about Cecilia, who took a vow of chastity and was beheaded in an especially gory scene: "*Her neck was struck three ineffective blows, and she lingered for three days*" (64). Further, Eugenia, who "*spent much of her life in male attire serving as an abbot of a monastery in Egypt*" is beheaded (76). All of these beheadings demonstrate more than an obsession with the separation of the brain and the body. They also carry with them the implications around an attempt to sever the head—the mind, the seat of reason and logic—from a female body that does not defer to the sexual demands of a male authority.

The repetition of this trope echoes one of the most memorable stories of beheading that reverberates through Western culture and is a significant theme in this novel. In *Lover,* when the women get hungry, "They all go down to the Greek place to eat" (92). Here, the women find sustenance in Greek food, and ancient Greek myth also provides Flynn with psychic nourishment. The mythical beheading of the Gorgon, Medusa, by Perseus reverberates throughout the pages of *Lover* along with the other decapitations in this novel. Snakes are a crucial piece of Medusa's iconography, and serpents inhabit the pages of this book. At one point, Flynn is overwhelmed by the clutter in her house, and it sickens her "as much as an insect in her soup, a snake under her pillow" (98). In this case, the imagery of snakes is presented alongside a pillow, where Flynn will rest her head. This passage brings to mind Medusa as well, as the most indelible physical trait of Medusa is the snakes sprouting in all directions from her head. Medusa imagery is even used more overtly near the end of the novel when one of Flynn's acquaintances mentions that she was recently raped. Flynn thinks

> "There is no way on earth any of them could ever rape me—but that is my secret, the secret of how a sudden landslide can block the entrance to the tunnel that leads to the treasure; or the mystery of how my female body can, under threat of ravishment, miraculously sprout thick coats of hair or turn into a beast whose head is coiled in hissing snakes." (148).

This last reference to Medusa as a means of protection from sexual violence is especially interesting, as by this point in the story, Flynn has begun to accept that her dream of the brain machine might be misguided, and she has begun to consider the possibility of living as a lover and as an artist. *Lover* makes connections between sexual assault and Medusa's power which are impossible to ignore.

This link between rape and the imagery of Medusa in the novel are confirmed in Medusa's mythical provenance. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* tells the story of how Medusa became a terrifying monster with the power to petrify anyone who gazed on her face. In his verses, Medusa was one of the three Gorgon sisters, and she had once been a maiden who was famous for her renowned beauty. She caught the attention of Poseidon, the god of the sea, and he assaulted her. In Ovid's version of the legend, when Poseidon raped Medusa in Athena's temple, the holy place was polluted by Medusa's blood. According to conventional wisdom, Athena was enraged by the desecration of her temple, and she took vengeance by transforming Medusa into the monster whose appearance was so awful that anyone who gazed upon her would be transformed to stone. This rape and its consequences are glossed over in just a few brief lines in Ovid's text when he writes: "But in Minerva's temple Ocean's god / The maid defil'd" and "Then with vengeful power / Chang'd the Gorgonian locks to writhing snakes" (164-66). Most mythical tellings of

Medusa's story agree that after Perseus uses Athena's shield to defeat the Gorgon, he brings Medusa's severed head to Athena who affixes the head to her aegis. The image of Medusa acts to shield Athena in most depictions of the goddess in antiquity.

The fearful head of Medusa possesses a capacity to both inspire and to terrify. This tension between erotic fascination and horror is explored in an essay by Sigmund Freud, which was analyzed in an article by Thomas Albrecht in his essay "Apotropaic Reading: Freud's 'Medusa's Head.'" Freud compared the dangerous gaze of Medusa with the chaotic snakes on her head to the "childhood visual trauma of the little boy's horrifying first look" at the genitals of his mother (4). This terror is inspired primarily by the fear of castration, according to Freud, an abstract threat until he witnesses adult female genitals. The terrifying effects of this shocking realization that his penis could be cut off is the boy's initiation into the castration complex. The narrative of Medusa's beheading coincides neatly with this description of the castration complex, as in both instances a body part that signifies the self is cut off. Freud's essay acknowledged the contradiction implied by the phallic nature of Medusa's hair. She represents castration, although she possesses a multitude of penis-like coils of hair. The stare of Medusa causes the witness to turn to stone, and in Freud's understanding of Medusa an analogous response is prompted by the male psyche's contemplation of female genitals. Although the image prompts fears of castration, "petrifaction … also signifies the stiffening of the spectator's erection" and is therefore a reassurance that the penis is still there (10). This tension between castration and erection—Eros and Thanatos—is in play in the myths of Medusa. It is this symmetry which resonates in the imagery of her severed head, and it helps to explain why this myth is remembered today. This balance between inspiration and awe is suggested by *Lover's* many references to Medusa.

The detail about Athena punishing Medusa for being raped strikes contemporary readers as a troubling piece of this story, as it smacks of the sort of victim-blaming that does not sit easily with an ethically enlightened society. In her article “Medusa and the Female Gaze,” Susan R. Bowers wrestles with the ways that artists have struggled to understand Medusa’s fate, and comments on the high stakes of finding meaning in the Medusa myth. She writes, “Medusa’s mythical image has functioned like a magnifying mirror to reflect and focus Western thought as it relates to women, including how women think about themselves” (217). There is meaning to be found by digging into how the snake goddess became Medusa; it is worthwhile to wonder why this vital symbol of women’s erotic and generative power evolved to be linked with shame and guilt around women’s sexuality and demonization of women’s physicality.

It is important to note that Ovid’s version of Medusa was an adaptation of earlier, pre-Hellenistic versions of a powerful goddess. Bowers notes, “As the serpent-goddess of the Libyan Amazons, for example, Medusa represented women’s wisdom.” As matriarchal traditions were supplanted by new political dynamics between men and women, the images of the goddesses that had held power were co-opted and demoted to the realm of the demon. Several scholars, including Bowers, have noted the mythical shift of Medusa from a powerful goddess to a hideous monster. They find that the transformation of Medusa into a monster may coincide with a shift away from matriarchal social organization. Athena was an important goddess for the Greeks, but she was never a symbol of female power. In fact, Athena was not even born from a female—she sprang directly out of Zeus’s head. Her actions towards Medusa, including her punishment for polluting Athena’s temple as well as the assistance she grants Perseus in his quest to vanquish Medusa, mean that Athena overcomes the female sexuality Medusa represents. Hal Foster's article "Medusa and the Real" delves into how the Medusa legend functions. He writes, "Athena intervenes first to suspend this wilded gaze through her proxy Perseus, then to return it to us, transformed, as a vision of rational civilization" (182). The older practices of venerating female creative power were replaced by myths in which women's erotic potential is repainted as terrifying; thus, the necessity to control and contain Medusa's force is justified. The control of female eros becomes part of Athena's power in civilizing humanity.

There is another possibility for understanding and re-visioning how Medusa attained her terrifying appearance. It might be possible to see what Athena did to Medusa as a gift. This is the posture McKenzie Schwark endorses in her recent article, "Snake Eyes: The Power to Turn the Patriarchy to Stone." In her interpretation of Ovid's version of Medusa, Schwark finds a chance for women to find ways to shield themselves and one another from the threat of sexual violence. She writes, "Athena's curse was not a punishment for Medusa, but a punishment for the gods and men who intended to harm her" (21). Rather than seeing the myth as a tale about female jealousy and vindictiveness, one might instead notice that Athena granted Medusa the power to protect herself from further violation. Medusa is not blighted, instead she is blessed with power over the gaze of men and gods.

In Greek myth, Perseus uses his shield to reflect Medusa's image in order to defeat her. What happens next in the myth is crucial, as this is where readers might find the connection to Flynn's dream of living as a brain machine: this hero of Hellenistic myth uses the power of mirroring to decapitate Medusa, and her severed head becomes a weapon he uses against his own foes—the head, separated from the female body is weaponized for the hero to use for his glory. In order for Medusa to serve the purposes of the masculine hero, and a patriarchal society, she must be defeated. The Gorgon head is useful to the Western tradition after it has been severed by the heroic male. Her defeat involves surrendering the power her head continues to possess even after it is severed from her body. The Gorgon's image still serves a purpose, defending Athena and Hellenistic civilization, even after Medusa herself dies. When Flynn surrenders her dream of living as a brain, separate from a body, this is the myth with which she interacts. Flynn's choice demonstrates a realization that Western culture celebrates the power of women only when they are willing to surrender their power to the violence of a man. Flynn is able to move on from her fascination with the brain machine—a dream of severing the brain from the body as a means of protection from sexual violence. She remains cognizant of Medusa's power to intervene against the gaze of men, and readers can see Flynn's embrace of Medusa as a means to become more fully herself.

Medusa, Veronica, and the Issue of Blood

". . . gallons of blood pouring from their bodies—out of you-know-where." (Harris 196)

Veronica is one of the major characters in this book; not only is she the lover of Flynn's mother, she also has an uncanny ability to exist everywhere. Readers learn Veronica, "Like the author of a novel, she has the ability to appear and disappear. . ." (7). Her name itself can be translated, roughly, from Latin to mean "true image," as the name can be read as a combination of two pieces —i.e. "*vera,*" meaning true along with "*icon,*" an image that represents something. The use of this name in the novel is another instance of the importance of images. This is an interesting instance of mimicry, a topic which will be explored more fully later. The presence of the saints and martyrs in the chapter prologues emphasize a crucial potential meaning for the name Veronica in this novel.

The name brings to mind the story of Saint Veronica who was responsible for the creation of an image of Christ—an icon which later becomes tangled in questions of legitimacy and forgery. According to the accepted Catholic version of the death of Christ, Saint Veronica presented a cloth to Jesus as he travelled to Golgotha where he was to be crucified. He used Veronica's handkerchief to wipe the sweat and blood from his face, and an exact reproduction of Christ's image is captured on her cloth. This connection to stains on fabric and to the concept of capturing an image is the reason Saint Veronica is recognized as the patron saint of both photographers and laundry workers. The cloth was supposedly preserved as a relic of St. Veronica. It is striking to note the detail that over the ages more than one version of this miraculous cloth has existed, as the relic was venerated in numerous locations simultaneously. Of course, this controversy is another aspect of excess that *Lover* can celebrate—this novel calls to mind the possibility that there are too many saintly relics for the devout to revere; the suggestion of truth and veracity connoted by Veronica's name can also be seen to contain implication of its own opposite, the possibility of untruth or forgery.

The rise in popularity of St. Veronica and the recognition of the sacred image on her cloth coincides with the shifting politics between the iconoclast and the iconophile factions of the Medieval Church. These tensions arose as the Christian faith, with its roots in Old Testament Judaism, interacted with Greek culture as the Byzantine Empire spread. God's second commandment, according to Moses's tablets exhorted: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" ("BibleGateway" Exodus 20:4). The Old Testament's proscriptions about representations of matters of faith began to lose their influence as Christianity took hold in areas where Hellenistic depictions of gods and goddesses adorned temples and household images of the gods were commonplace. The Byzantine iconoclasts, including Constantine V and Leo V, recognized the power of representation and feared "fetishistic and talismanic abuses of images, which raised fears of pagan perversions" (Kristeva 48). Iconophiles such as Nicephorus, the author of a treatise entitled *Apologeticus Major,* a treatise arguing for the veneration of icons, agreed that images possessed uncanny powers over the faithful, but they saw potential for these images to strengthen the connections between the human and divine realms (Kristeva 48). Veronica's cloth bearing the image of Christ is recognized as an *archeiropoietos*, a Greek term meaning "'true' image" (Kuryluk 1); it is an artifact bearing the imprint of Christ that was not created by human hands. Eventually, the Church would allow artistic representations of holy figures, but while the debates raged on, the sacred status of *archeiropoietos* images was accepted since these were supposedly not created by human artifice (Kristeva 47-49). Thus, the image on St. Veronica's cloth could be safely venerated, since it was produced by the actual presence of Christ rather than created by human artifice. The popularity of St. Veronica's cloth is credited with relaxing conventions about iconic depictions over time.

In the context of *Lover*, the ideology invoked by the text's latent references to St. Veronica has crucial implications. Of key importance here is the fact that biblical scholars have documented connections between Saint Veronica and the woman who was healed of "an issue of blood" ("BibleGateway" Matt 9:20) when she touched Christ's hem. In her book, *Veronica and Her Cloth: History, Symbolism, and Structure of a "True" Image,* Ewa Kuryluk takes a close look into the history and meaning to be discovered in the legend of St. Veronica. Kuryluk notes that the Church connects Veronica, who would bear the true image of Christ, with a woman suffering from interminable bleeding who sought to be healed Jesus. The book of Matthew describes the healing of the Hemorrhissa, a woman who had been suffering from an "issue of blood, a permanent menstruation, whose flux stops when she touches the hem of Jesus' dress" (5). Kuryluk details how the stories of Jesus and the Hemorrhissa mirror one another: "the man whose cloth has stopped the woman's bleeding has his own flux of blood which she arrests with her cloth" (7). The detail that the bleeding of this woman was a menstrual flow has important implications when read in context with *Lover* and is confirmed by Barbara Baert in her article, "Touching the Hem: The Thread between Garment and Blood in the Story of the Woman with the Haemorrhage (Mark 5:24b-34parr)." Baert cites sources that establish that the bleeding woman Christ healed was, indeed, suffering from a uterine condition, and this source also mentions that her condition was considered shameful. Baert writes:

> "The bleeding woman appears suddenly out of the crowd with a strong desire to be cured of her hemorrhage—*siccatus est fons sanguinis eius*. The reference to the *fons* in verse 29, refers to the fact that her hemorrhage was a uterine problem, and not for example a nosebleed. Another argument in the secondary exegetical literature, is that the fact that the flow not being located exactly. . . might indicate discretion, even shame in Mark's redaction." (311)

Baert takes into account the superstitions surrounding the touch of menstruating women in both Medieval and Hellenistic cultures. She notices connections in the depictions of this bleeding woman, illustrations that bring to mind an implied awareness of links between textiles, touch, and fluidity.

It is important to note that Harris was conscious of the connections between the Hemorrhissa and St. Veronica. The final chapter prologue summarizes the legend of St. Veronica:

> *"The story of Veronica goes: inspired by a suffering face, she held a cloth to it; and on the cloth was left an image of the face she had wiped. No one knows for*

> *sure, however. Some imagine her to be that woman who had 'an issue of blood.' Others point out that the English word 'vernicle' means* true image." (Harris 207)

In *Lover*, the characters spend a great deal of time pondering menstruation. Samaria tells Flynn about the trauma of getting her first period: "I started to cry because I would rather have been dead than gone forever, like I was. They came in with rags and a belt. They said Now you are a woman. *I* had been exchanged for a *woman*" (102). As the novel progresses, the twins—Rose and Rose-lima—begin menstruating, and Rose later tells Flynn that their flow stopped forever when they went to Niagara. *Lover's* frank discussion about the characters' menstruation is a violation of cultural norms. Not only does the novel present frank commentary on the physicality of this taboo, one of the final sections of the novel concentrates the focus on menstrual blood. The closing scene of the movie the twins describe to Flynn is a description of the world drowning in menstrual flows from a clan of giantesses. According to Rose, this bloody final scene is a fitting conclusion, as "It ends with Justice being done" (202). The deluge of blood, watched over by the Virgin Mary, is the twins' prescription to undo the wrongs of centuries of persecution.

Experts also link the stories of this bleeding woman and Saint Veronica to the archaic female presence in the Medusa myth whose blood polluted Athena's temple. Kuryluk, Baert, and Kristeva trace the iconography of St. Veronica and the Hemorrhissa back even further to Hellenistic beliefs about the characteristics of the uterus. This organ was believed to grow serpent-like tentacles, and pre-Christian imagery abounds with depictions of uterine icons which bear resemblances to an octopus or hedgehog-like creature. Eventually, these images of women's reproductive organs were depicted with a terrifying face with coiling snakes for hair (Baert 338). This is where St. Veronica and the Hemorrhissa can be traced back to their pagan precursor—Medusa. As Kurlyuk surmises, “Religions come and go; images persist. The ‘true’ faces of Christ were preceded by the masks of Medusa” (153). The menstruating woman is condemned and secluded as a social outcast, as was Medusa after her transmogrification.

Menstrual taboos have been an important part of the lives of women across time and around the world; and although the strict regulation of women’s behavior during menses has been relaxed, contemporary American etiquette still demands that menstruation ought to remain invisible and is unmentionable. Most of these menstrual taboos are rooted in an understanding that the menses ought to inspire horror and shame. In the Old Testament, God legislates the seriousness of bodily discharges:

> “Menstruating women remain impure and infectious for seven days, and the same is true for men who lie with them (Lev. 15:19-24). Females suffering from hemorrhage are considered polluted for the entire duration of their illness and are treated as social outcasts (Lev. 15:25-7).” (Kuryluk 18)

During menses, the cultural expectations for women in Hellenistic Greece and early Judaism and Christianity were similar; women were to sequester themselves and avoid the gaze of men. Further, they were expected to refrain from looking at others or handle food or household items, as the dangerous presence of menstrual blood was seen as a risk for the entire community. Aristotle documented the process by which menstruating women ruined mirrors, a topic that will be explored in the next section. In her book *Thealogy and Embodiment: The Post-Patriarchal Reconstruction of Female Sacrality,* Melissa Raphael sums up the revulsion surrounding menstruating women thus:

> “Broadly speaking, in the world’s religions menstrual blood is a defiling negative energy because it represents death . . .. a copious red discharge [signifies] danger to the masculine supernatural order in that female supernatural energies will not, that month, have been exhausted that month by providing the community with child. The menstruant might instead use these energies to mutate the living forms around her. The superstition of the ‘evil eye’ may originally have been identified with the glance of the menstruant harming crops, food, and babies.” (175).

The religious and cultural conventions around menstruation had implications that affected the material lives of women in their day to day lives, and the shame and horror of this biological reality impacted the lives of women and their understanding of themselves.

The novel's multiple references to menstruation is a facet Laura Christine Godfrey takes into consideration in her article entitled "Creating a Nonpatriarchal Lineage in Bertha Harris's *Lover.*" Godfrey explores the ways that the novel subverts traditional family ties in order for the women in the story to devise a new community. She writes, "By rejecting the patriarchal definition of womanhood, the lovers redefine blood lineage in a lesbian commune that lacks blood altogether" (198). It can be pointed out that although the characters don't menstruate, in the end they embrace menstruation and imagine a world that is flooded by a deluge of blood. Rather than surrendering their womanhood along with menstruation, the characters' obsession with menstruation prompts readers to question what our traditional understanding of womanhood entails. It troubles the assumption that biology is the necessary determinant of gender. By refusing to menstruate, they can refuse the social constructs that accompany female biology as it has been understood by Western biological sciences. *Lover* shows readers that rather than a source of stigma and fear, menstrual blood can be revised and seen instead as a font of purifying justice.

CHAPTER THREE

ABILITY: THE LOVER KNOWS SEEING IS BEING

Mirrors and Excess

"There seems to be more women than usual in the house." (Harris 60)

One of the most interesting elements of *Lover* is its ability to portray excess. Not only do characters hedonistically indulge throughout, enjoying food, drink, and sex, but the novel also self-consciously presents an excess of characters as well. The ubiquitous presence of twins and mirror images throughout the text is one of the ways this excess is accomplished. Twins and mirrors are everywhere in *Lover,* and this creates a profusion of meaning in the novel.

Flynn's sisters, Rose and Rose-lima, are twins, as are the boys next door, Bogart and Boatwright. Samaria's mother and aunt are both named Mary—one is Mary Theresa and the other Mary Bridget. Veronica is an interesting example as well: we learn "she began life as a bigamist, as a twin, as a married woman, as a lover" (7), and Samaria tells her daughter stories in which Veronica looks exactly like her (Samaria) before she finally goes to meet Veronica. Readers learn that as the novelist, Veronica has the strange ability to be anywhere at any time, and so she exhibits an excess of presence in the text. Veronica also embodies another instance of excess presented in *Lover*: she appears as her own mirror image. At the very beginning of the novel, we learn that "Veronica, however, came out of nowhere, and so she used to go exclusively with Veronica. They were childhood sweethearts. . . Veronica gave Veronica a red heart-shaped box of candy" (5). Mirrors appear as readers first get to know Flynn. In the room where Flynn awakens from an illness, "The fire sheds like mica from the mirror. One reflects the other; both fire and mirror collapse and lay hidden in the tufts of the red rug. . ." (11). Later, we see the

Marshallin from *Der Rosenkavalier* “looking into her mirror, watching charm fade” (38). The house where the women live is at the edge of a lake that calls to mind mirror symbolism with reflective potential to duplicate all the happenings in their house. All of these twins and mirror images further complicate the novel—and the superabundance of the characters and their surprising appearances and reappearances add to the theme of excess in the novel.

This doubling serves as an important subversive tactic in the novel. There has always been a complex relationship between humans and mirrors, as reflections captivate attention and focus understanding of oneself. The ways mirrors figure in the creation of image for women is especially complex. Ancient Greek philosophers are the source of many of contemporary Western cultural understandings, and therefore it is relevant to mention Aristotle’s ideas concerning women and mirrors; this is especially important in this case, as his ideas about mirrors intersect with menstrual taboos in a way that makes his philosophy here especially relevant to a discussion about *Lover*. Superstitions around women’s potential to ruin mirrors can be traced back to Aristotle’s treatise “On Dreams” where he writes:

> “If a woman looks into a highly polished mirror during the menstrual period, the surface of the mirror becomes clouded with a blood-red colour (and if the mirror is a new one the stain is not easy to remove, but if it is an old one there is less difficulty). The reason for this is that . . . the organ of sight not only is acted on by the air, but also sets up an active process, just as other bright objects do; for the organ of sight is also a bright object possessing colour. Now it is reasonable to suppose that at the menstrual periods the eyes are in the same state as any other part of the body; and there is the additional fact that they are naturally full of blood vessels. Thus when menstruation takes place, as the result of a feverish disorder of the blood, the difference of condition in the eyes, though invisible to us is none the less real (for the nature of the menses and of the semen is the same); and the eyes set up a movement in the air. This imparts a certain quality to the layer of air extending over the mirror, and assimilates it to itself; and this layer affects the surface of the mirror.” (quoted in Kuryluk 162)

The idea that mirrors could be clouded by the gaze of menstruating women is evidence of the theory that shadows and reflections are emanations that can leak from oneself and interact with nearby objects.

The action of mirrors was interesting enough to warrant Aristotle's theorizing; mirrors also were perilous. Mirrors captured the discharged emanation, the essence that oozed from the presence of the human form, and they sent the reflection out in new directions. The notion that a mirror could be stained by exposure to the "bloody" eyes of a menstruating woman is strikingly similar to the Lacanian ideas of gaze and a subject's ability to perceive images as they project onto a screen. Lacan's ideas about the nature of perception will be explored more thoroughly in the next section, but it is helpful to preface his theories with this cursory glance at Aristotle's thoughts on the nature of mirrors. Although Lacan's explanations on the interaction of the subject with the world through the gaze might at first seem to be a departure from a more traditional understanding of how one sees the world, perhaps they are not so puzzling as they appear at first glance. The notion that the perceiving subject can modify the appearance of what it sees by the act of seeing is suggested in Western philosophy as far back as Aristotle.

Ideas of excess, mirroring, and the implications of the interplay between these notions in women's fiction are a primary concern of Luce Irigaray, and in her work the mirror becomes an instrument by which one might access the potential for woman as subject that can be expressed in language. Irigaray notes that language has been a form in which women's oppression was enacted as well as a reflection of the oppression women lived, and this highlights the importance of women finally finding their own voice in writing. In *This Sex Which Is Not One,* she writes, "*What remains to be done, then, is to work at 'destroying' the discursive mechanism"* which has failed the "articulation of the female sex in discourse" (76). It is through the use of reflection, doubling, and mimicry that Irigaray proposes that women's texts can undermine the destructive basis of Western discourse.

Irigaray's ideas about how this subversion might be realized prove to be especially interesting when examined within the context of Harris's novel. Irigaray anticipates the usefulness of the successful application of a playful mimicry to subvert oppression inherent in the dominant discourses. She notices the ways in which mimesis creates a reflection that emphasizes the position of the voice of women outside of where it has been traditionally located:

> "To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the 'perceptible' of 'matter'—to 'ideas,' in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible,' by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means 'to unveil' the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. *They also remain elsewhere* . . ." (*This Sex* 76)

Irigaray mentions the ways that mimesis involves an interaction between the original and the reflection of the original. She sees a potential for women to express their subject-hood in interplay between the self and the mirrored reflection. That is, a woman is not her self as expressed in ordinary language, and obviously she is not simply the reflection of herself in the mirror. Women's writing is powerful, according to Irigaray, when it can exist in the process of bouncing between the reality of the experienced world and the representation of reality through language. The self of the subject thus exists as the process of reflecting and copying experience.

Irigaray argues that the logic, rules, and constraints of traditional discourses are comprised of "phallocentric logic," and as such, they are insufficient for defining the possibility of a female subject. The only way women can truly express their feminine experience is by creating a disruptive excess, which will overwhelm the structures of phallocentric logic. She notes, "the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object,* but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal" (78). Irigaray rejects the linear logic that has dominated Western thought for centuries and looks instead towards the creation of a new language which will be able to communicate what it means to be female.

This recognition of the power of reflection is the force Irigaray invokes when she proposes mirrors as a means of cracking open the patriarchal overtones present in Western philosophy and psychoanalytic theory. Ofelia Schutte's article "Irigaray on the Problem of Subjectivity" reflects on Irigaray's feminist resistance to the analytical efficiency of definition and delineation as the only way of knowing. Schutte writes, "The strategic feminist struggle for Irigaray thus becomes the subversion of the power of efficacy and predictability of definition" (69). To counter understanding that stems from the phallic economy, Irigaray proposes a concave mirror with the power to focus the light of human intelligence in a new way. Irigaray writes:

> "But perhaps through this specular surface which sustains discourse is found not the void of nothingness but the dazzle of multifaceted speleology. A scintillating and incandescent concavity, of language also, that threatens to set fire to fetish-objects and gilded eyes. The recasting of their truth value is already at hand. We need only press on a little farther into the depths, into that so-called dark cave which serves as hidden foundation to their speculations. For where we expect to find the opaque and silent matrix of a logos immutable in the certainty of its own light, fires and mirrors are beginning to radiate, sapping the evidence of a logos at its base!" (*Speculum* 143-44)

The imagery of concavity in this passage is a negotiation with Plato's allegory of the cave. Plato's description of human knowledge as the perception of shadows on the wall of a cave posits the impossibility of knowing the ideal forms behind the shadows that can be grasped by human perception. Part of Irigaray's intervention here is to clarify the geometric similarities between this cavern and the womb. She imagines what might become visible if one could polish the walls of Plato's cave; when the mind can focus the light of the sun onto the mirror of woman, she imagines the dazzling reflections that appear.

Lover is cognizant of mythical mirrors as a source of danger to men and women alike, but the novel never shies away from this danger. When the novel is nearly finished, there is a nod to the myth of Narcissus who was ensnared by his love for his own reflection. Samaria tells Veronica that she had planned to commit suicide: "I had planned to lean over the water, then shoot. I had hoped you'd find my body floating in the water lilies" (210). The most obvious connection to mythical mirrors, however, is the repeated reference to Medusa. Through the use of a reflective shield, Perseus is able to overcome her petrifying gaze. *Lover* is a novel that succeeds in using mimicry, excess, and playful mimesis to create a new expression of the self. By creating a world where sometimes "There seems to be more women than usual in the house" (Harris 60), *Lover* is alive with the potential to destabilize the discourse that has impeded women's expression for so long.

Gaze and the Subject: Images and Screens

"We rubbed away all the Picassos in the whole house . . .. She was covered with the Blue and Rose periods, and I with all the angles of cubisme." (Harris 118)

As *Lover* engages in the creation of art, it also draws attention to the interactions between works of art, the creative artist, and the appreciation of the aficionado. In the novel, the relationships between the creator, the created, and the audience are blurred and distorted in a manner that pulls Medusean themes into yet another context. Attention to the interactions between gaze and object, as well as links between artist and audience creates a space in which straightforward understandings of perception are challenged.

Medusa's stare is deadly, as she can kill by captivating the viewer and freezing the viewer with her gaze. In his article "Medusa and the Real," Hal Foster draws lines from the Medusa myth and artistic depictions of Medusa to the work of twentieth-century psychoanalysis. Of particular importance it the way in which he explains where Lacan's theories concerning the relationships between subject and object intersect and illuminate the dangers that viewing implies. Foster explores the connections between Lacan's understanding of perception and the power of Medusa. He explains that in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan theorized the dynamics involved in a subject's perception of an object in the world. Lacan argued that the gaze was not merely a function of the subject, rather it involved a more complex interaction between the eye of the subject and the projected reality of the object. Part of this process is straightforward—the viewing subject directs attention to the object; Lacan calls this the "Cartesian" notion of seeing.

Lacan theorized that this simple understanding of perception, an understanding in which the subject is in control of the vision, oversimplifies the process of seeing. His assertion is that "Cartesian" vision does not acknowledge that in viewing the object, the subject is also exposed to the emanence of the object, the radiation of the reality of the object into the realm of the viewer. Lacan writes, "I am not simply that punctiform being located at the geometrical point from which the perspective is grasped. No doubt, in the depths of my eye, the picture is painted. The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I, I am in the picture" (quoted in Foster 186). The object exudes its own gaze, a radiation of its reality is transmitted in all directions. A version of this diffusion is projected to the viewer and is screened by the viewer's perceptions. At the level of the screen, the observing subject perceives the object as the projection of an image. The subject controls the vision, but the object also controls the image that the subject apprehends. Foster explains: "Here the tables are turned: the subject-as-viewed is now in a position of potential annihilation" (186). Lacan found that there was no possibility of interaction with reality beyond human perception, and perception was always mediated by human language and signs. Any understanding of the real was, therefore filtered by signs. Perception of images outside of the symbolic order is impossible, and so it is never possible to know vision without the mediation of communicable interpretation of images. Observation of the real, beyond the mediation of the symbolic order would be impossible to communicate. Venturing outside the image screen, one risks falling outside of the social, civilized realm: "we risk the outsider status of the psychotic" (187). The Lacanian viewer is only safe so long as he remains blind to the potential that exists within the gaze of the object, beyond the screen. The image screen is necessary protection from the real, as to see beyond it would involve being "touched by the real, petrified by its gaze" (188).

The threat exuded by the viewed object towards the viewing subject is the point where Medusa exhibits her awful power. She is the female form that refuses to be objectified; while she is alive, no one may view her, and Foster implies that her power stems from her ability to override the screen that shields the viewer. A subject that hopes to apprehend a vision of this figure is foiled, and the objectification of the viewer's gaze is reflected back to the viewer. No one can remain a subject and view Medusa, as the observation of her transposes the viewer into stone—into an object. Lacan describes Medusa as "the revelation of. . . the real lacking any mediation, of the ultimate real, of the object which isn’t an object any longer” (quoted in Foster 183). Only when her image is filtered onto a screen, when Perseus uses a mirror to deflect the power of her image, can she be viewed and subsequently overpowered. Through the mediation of reflection, the dangerous power of the real that Medusa represents is filtered into the Gorgoneion image that Athena wears on her aegis. The severed head, once it has been secured by Athena, becomes a protection against the evil Medusa represents. Medusa becomes civilized, and her power is channeled into the protection her image offers to humankind through the mediation of Athena. The horrific becomes benevolent as the head transforms into an apotropaic totem.

Foster notes that this shift has implications related to the process of artistic creation. He asks readers to notice that the head of Medusa worn on Athena’s aegis “positions the mirror-shield, the Gorgoneion, as a kind of ur-painting, an originary model of art” (183). The roots of representative artwork, the labor of creating images as reflections of reality, can be traced to Athena’s utilitarian appropriation of Medusa’s visage displayed in service of civilization. This connection between the artist and the mythical female is also observed explored in Julia Kristeva’s book, *The Severed Head: Capital History*. Kristeva explores the human fascination with beheading by tracing its cultural origin back to prehistoric cannibalism, and she describes its hold on the psyche from its roots in the formation of language in the mirror stage. Since Medusa’s legend foregrounds the image of her grisly decapitation, Kristeva explores Medusa’s story at length and seeks to understand why this tale has continued to fascinate for so many centuries. Kristeva discusses Medusa’s link to creativity thus:

> “Cut off Medusa’s head if you want to see (it), if you want to know. Spectacle, speculation—whether erotic or philosophic—is rooted in your first triumphs over archaic terrors. They depend on your abilities to face head-on, and make others see, your endogenous melancholies. Beginning from there, you can give your

> fantasies free rein, including . . . your Sadean fantasies. Could Medusa be the patron saint of visionaries and artists?" (33)

The fusion of violence with image in the creation of art is especially powerful, and it creates a form of art that supersedes the idea of art as representation of reality. The images of the Gorgoneion, like the *vera icons* of St. Veronica, are more than art; they are icons. The icon resides in a gap between consubstantiality and mimesis. It is not the divine, but the divine subject of the icon elevates the experience of the icon above the worldliness of representational art.

Art creates connection between the artist and the audience via the intermediation of the work of art. One crucial point that must be noted is that *Lover* insists that the relationship between the successful artist and the created art is not straightforward. The artist can sometimes inhabit the art in a way that overrides conventional understandings of the artist's role. Veronica describes her dreams to the characters, and her descriptions of these dreams show that she maintains an interesting relationship to the forgeries she creates. In the novel, Veronica says, "I am always exactly the work I am presently engaged in painting—I mean, there is no difference between me and my painting during my dream, and I am not afraid of that" (117). This is the same character whose name echoes the name of St. Veronica. Bertha Harris has also explained the connections between Veronica and the Hemorrhissa, and readers now can track the presence of Medusean myth in the story of this woman with the issue of blood. The character, Veronica, is closely enmeshed with the Medusa who had the powers to override human powers of perception. She uses this dynamic power to craft an enhanced art. The notion of becoming the work of art in progress complicates the relationship between the creator and the created, as the artist mirrors herself to create the art. Blurring the distinctions between creator and created, between the artist's intention and the artistic presentation creates a situation in which a viewer can also reimagine the function of art. Veronica tells her family the process by which both she and the buyer of her art become saturated with the pictures: "She started rubbing her hands and arms across the paintings and she gestured for me to follow suit; and I did. We rubbed away all the Picassos in the whole house" (118). Eventually the art on the canvases disappears, and instead of the paint covering the canvases separate from the artist and the audience, "She was covered with the Blue and Rose periods and I with all the angles of *cubisme*" (118). Both artist and patron are transformed by the art. Veronica's artistic forgeries establish a fresh experience with the art which grants both artist and audience direct access to the reality of the art. *Lover* depicts art as a means for the observant subject to experience the world without the shield of a screen to intermediate. In this novel, Harris has created artists who can override Lacan's understanding perception and erase the distinctions that kept his subjects sane. This illustrates the radically transformative power that can be accessed when an artist is willing to connect with the figure of Medusa.

Art and Performance: Making Monsters

"How can there be more?" (Harris 153)

In addition to the use of twins and mirrors, *Lover* also presents characters who use more creative means to enact the excesses that undermine traditional Western logic. The characters in the novel are artists, and their artistic creations contain a force that can blur the boundaries between genuine and sham, copy and copied. The profusion of character creates confusion for the characters themselves at times, and at one point, Flynn asks, "How can there be more?" (153). One of the more exuberant ways this novel creates that excess is through indulgence in artistic creation.

Part of what gives *Lover* the power to de-naturalize and subvert our expectations is the way its characters revel in the confusions they create between the real and the fake as the women express their talents through their artistic endeavors. Parody is one of the key modes in which the characters pursue their artistic expression. In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon identifies parody as an important aspect of postmodern art, and she identifies how parody works to destabilize traditional norms regarding art and artists: "parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (93). Parody works by calling our attention to the works of art from the past and undermines our nostalgic associations with these works by ironically commentating on "our humanist assumptions about artistic originality and uniqueness" (93). Hutcheon claims that postmodern parody is often used by feminists "to point to the history and historical power of those cultural representations, while ironically contextualizing both in such a way as to deconstruct them" (102). This deployment of parody for its ability to both highlight and undermine the expectations of Western assumptions about art is consistently demonstrated by the artistic works created by the characters in *Lover.*

Veronica is an artist, and one of her occupations is forging and selling famous works of art. As such, her work becomes a parody of Western expectations about the value of art. She creates forgeries of famous artworks that are believable enough to hang in museums, and her work is purchased by collectors. The copies are so real, in fact, her work prompts readers to question the connections between forgeries and originals. Samaria tells Flynn that forgery "is not an act of art. It is like an act of God because, in the hands of the great masters, the forgery is no different from the real thing . . .. Forgery means that the art is not real, but that no one, not even the forger (like in Veronica's case) can tell the difference between the first and the second" (109). Her artistic skill is a crucial part of blurring the boundaries between the real and its carbon copy.

Writing is another form of art familiar to the characters in this novel, and the characters bend the conventions of this art form freely. Veronica decides to become a novelist, and her writing plays with the differences between fiction and memoir. She claims she does not intend to write great fiction. Instead, she asserts, "What I want to do is win prizes and go on television" (94). Veronica's aspirations bring into the story an awareness of authors' purpose. She points out that there are plenty of reasons one might choose to write a novel, and some of these reasons are potentially quite selfish and lean more towards parody of the artistic calling rather than an altruistic expression of vision.

In order to better understand Veronica's intentions in her writing, readers should take a closer look at the content of her book. Although she claims she is writing a novel, she instead is writing the events around her in a way that resembles memoir or journaling rather than novelistic writing. At the end of the novel, we read, "'So it is left up to me,' Veronica wrote, 'to be the one to tell the truth'" (207). Veronica is writing the truth of what happens to these characters in a book she titles *Lover.* For Veronica, this book is a memoir, but to the readers, *Lover* is the novel they hold in their hands. Veronica's writing challenges traditional understanding of the relationship between author, character, text, and truth. In this way, the novel generates confusion about what it means to create texts.

Veronica is not the only writer in this community. Samaria, the character who is usually Flynn's grandmother, is a poet. However, we learn that Samaria "is the poet, though she neither reads nor writes poetry. She reads nothing but fiction" (57). This poet who writes no poetry secludes herself in the boathouse by the end of the story so that she can write her memoirs. Other characters also exhibit a flair for storytelling. For example, Rose and Rose-lima created a screenplay, although they later forget if they sold it to Twentieth Century Fox or Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (194). They tell Flynn the story of their movie about a giant woman and a flood of menstrual blood that "ends with Justice being done" (202). It should be noted that the stories these women create are every bit as outlandish as *Lover* itself. The creations of each of these characters embrace Harris's own postmodern aesthetic sensibilities.

The women also express themselves in dance, and the performance of dance becomes an artistic expression of emotion. At one point, the characters begin to dance, and "Our dance, it appears, turns out to be what we imagine Swan Lake could be" (47). Later, Bogart and Boatwright "[p]ut on a record. . . and dance the dirty shag until they are too tired to dance any more" (77). In the introduction, Harris talks about the role of dance in her own upbringing and the creation of her own artistic sensibility. She writes, "My father taught me his [tap and soft-shoe] routines and we performed regularly for the lifers at the state asylum for the insane and for the residents of the state home for the deaf and the blind" (xiv). Harris says that to dance for these spectators who "are not certain that the dancers are not at all who they say they are, but instead are Satan and the Holy Ghost, or a plate of fried chicken . . . engendered in me a taste for surrealism. . ." (xiv). The fact that dance, specifically dance with a vaudeville sensibility, became part of Harris's aesthetic philosophy helps to explain the importance of performances in this novel.

Other sorts of performance are also important in *Lover*. The women in the house regularly perform *Hamlet.* The actors often swap roles and use creative costuming to reimagine characters. At one point, Veronica decides Flynn will play Gertrude naked, and Flynn agrees as long as she can play Gertrude naked *and* wear a long fake beard. Also, the novel opens with a description of *Der Rosenkavalier,* and characters from this opera inhabit the text and appear and disappear unexpectedly throughout. Costume is an important aspect of the characters' performances, and in her article, "Bertha Harris's Lover: Lesbian *and* Postmodern," Amanda C. Gable discusses how the costumes operate in this text. She writes, "Costumes seem to be alternate selves. . . rather than covering up a self, they create a new layer of self" (148). Gable is correct to notice that even in costume, the characters retain their original selves underneath, and this addition of the costume simply adds another layer of identity over the top, further *excess-erizing* the characters.

Even outside the context of theatre, the characters in *Lover* readily engage in play with costumes, as crossdressing—wearing the garb of the opposite sex—and cross-crossdressing—dressing as a member of the opposite sex who wears the garb of the opposite sex—serve as a means of expression. When Veronica goes to Bogart and Boatwright and tells them her plan for them to achieve glory by going over Niagara Falls in twin barrels, she assumes the identity of Harold Horoscope. Describing this character, Flynn says to Samaria: "He wore a harris tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows. He wore scuffed moccasins and a beard. He carried a heavy leather briefcase. Was that Veronica, the novelist?" (111). Even at the very beginning of the book, in the scene from *Der Rosenkavalier,* we see the character of Octavian, a male character played by a young woman, disguising himself as a maid. In this case, we see a girl playing the part of a man who is playing the part of a girl. The costumes create a world in which gender is not a fixed, biological reality; instead it is a mask that can be donned to play any role.

These transformations work to detach the gendered expectations from the characters in a manner that allows them to operate free from their biologically determined sex. In the chapter "Starting from Snatch: The Seduction of Performance in Bertha Harris's *Lover*," Victoria L. Smith concludes that the way the characters revel in performance and art show how fantasy and illusion function as a structuring principle in the novel. The same sensibility which allows a character to be *both* Veronica, the novelist, *and* Mr. Horoscope, the event promoter, is an example of how *Lover*, according to Smith, is able to "foreground identificatory uncertainties, performativity and the pleasures to be had in the participation in illusions" (75-76). The artistic creations and the performances allow the characters to emphasize their subjectivity through artifice. In Harris's introduction to *Lover,* she comments on the "production of the gay sensibility, whose practice hinges, like the arts, very much on decisively choosing *as if* over *is*" (xxiii-xxiv). Art—as painting, storytelling, and performance—becomes the medium through which the woman and lesbian can create a version of herself in the world.

This gesture by which the characters create their own self is a radical break from the traditional heteronormative understanding of subject that has dominated Western culture. It is a deviation from traditional understanding of the binaries that serve as the foundation of human knowledge. The distinctions between subject and object, between art and audience, and between image and gaze are all called into question by *Lover.* One of the results is that the cultural work enacted by this novel effectively brings readers into the territory of the unknown and the unknowable. Perhaps this is the source of much of the horror readers experience as they fall into the "looking glass" of this text. It is a journey into a monstrous territory.

Lover is attentive to the ways that destabilization in texts connects with fear. Therefore, it is worthwhile to take a closer look into how questions of horror and monstrosity intersect with feminism's concerns, especially in a reading of this novel. In her book, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, Rosi Braidotti explains the relationship between society and the monster in a feminist context. She points out that the monstrous has always been the site of deviations from the norm. Since the norms have always been measured by men and use men as the standard, the body of women has always been inclined to monstrous connotations. She writes. “The female is therefore an anomaly, a variation on the main theme of man-kind” (79). Western discourse rests on the dualistic system of opposing values—male and female, normal, abnormal—the tension between opposites is the organizing arrangement of thought. In this order, one side of the binary is favored over the other. The monstrous must be contained and controlled, contained, and regulated in order to preserve reason and the allow for the flourishing of what is “normal.” The misogyny that this arrangement creates is not a flaw in this system; it is an inherent trait built into the structure of human understanding. Braidotti proposes the feminist become nomadic and wander away from this patriarchal scheme and thus escape the imprisonment it entails.

Bertha Harris presents another vision of the what it means to be monstrous, and she provides a different understanding of the monster’s potential: one that does not escape to the margins as a refugee from patriarchal systems. Harris combines elements, artistically, to create a monster that can exist within, inform, and reform the culture that despises it. In an article entitled “*What We Mean to Say:* Notes Toward Defining the Nature of Lesbian Literature” Harris discusses the creation of lesbian self in writing. One of the key focal points of this essay is a discussion of the monstrous potential of the lesbian experience when rendered in literature. She agrees with the definition of monster that Braidotti embraced as well, writing, “Monsters . . . are emblems of feeling in patriarchy. The enemy of the monster is phallic materialism, which demands that chaos be shaped and ordered, made sexually economical, around the emblem of a cock" (6). She sees literature as a means of showing a culture its own reflection, and the power of texts comes from its ability to shape the culture in which it exists and create change, claiming "The service of literature is to show us who we are. Put more simply, we tend to behave, and think, as books show us how to behave and think" (6). Harris notes that understandings of lesbians both in the real world and in literature have focused solely on their sexuality in a way that has precluded an understanding of subject outside of what happens in bed. She proposes that in order to create a more complete picture of self, lesbians could embrace the monstrous and use this as inspiration to enrich the lives of real women.

After all, the monster has the potential to terrify, but it also fascinates. Harris writes about the traits held in common by anyone who rebels against the societal norms: "Monsters, heroes, criminals, and lesbians (and sometimes saints and gods)" (7). All of these outsiders have these traits in common: "an ability to make a life outside the social norm that seems both enviable and frightening to those inside" and "marks of difference that are physically manifested and both horrify and thrill" (7). The presence of these characters who embrace their differences and find inspiration in their opposition to what is natural have an ability to teach readers a new way of seeing themselves and their world. In literature, a woman can present herself dressed in the costume of the monster to slip into the consciousness of the reader. Thus, she can "[reveal] what was there all along: a free woman declaring through art, for the first time, what a lesbian is" (8). Although this particular article is focused on the monstrous potential of the lesbian in literature, it is impossible to ignore the implications this has for all women. Harris's creative acceptance of the horrific is a feminist tactic; a maneuver that can adjust the dominant culture's awareness and recognition of its possibility for artistic expression.

Conclusion

"Bertha is dazzling: is irreplaceable." (138)

At first, the overwhelming postmodern sensibilities of *Lover*—with its confusion of characters and non-linear plot might prompt a reader to assume that the action of the story is too confusing to be understood in the same way readers expect to understand more traditional novels. This is one of the conclusions Sally Robinson reaches in her article, "The 'Anti-Logos Weapon': Multiplicity in Women's Texts." Robinson's article is a compelling examination of the ways in which several novels, including *Lover*, align with the theories of French theorists like Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray. Robinson's project is focused intently on articulating the ways in which these novels break with traditional discourses. Thus, she finds that *Lover* deliberately defies readers' expectations that a novel will provide intelligible relationships between characters. Her exploration of *Lover's* subversion of the function of character as primarily a rejection of realism's male-centered quest for unity between signified and language is a valid interpretation of the text. However, it is not the only possible reading.

In *Lover,* Flynn rejects the fragmented, segmented, severed versions of self that are presented as options for women in her society. The inspiration she finds instead is rooted in a vision of Medusa as whole and vital. Bowers's aforementioned article is an exploration of the wealth of inspiration women have begun to discover in the mythic roots of Medusa and the erotic power this Gorgon represents. Bowers summarizes the work of several twentieth-century woman poets when she writes, "The journey of Medusa in Western culture is a journey from the mutilation and destruction of the female body in Greco-Roman myth to the celebration of the whole female self" (235). She doesn't mention Harris's writing, but her conclusion applies nonetheless. The characters in *Lover* recover an intact version of Medusa that inspires artistic creation and influences their capacity for erotic arousal. The women in this work find their new creative and amorous flourishing forges the foundations for a vision of self that allows for the creation of subjectivity that Luce Irigaray could applaud.

This novel is much more than a postmodernist romp. There is, in fact, a way to simplify all of the confusion Harris creates with the twins and mirror images and the characters who appear and disappear without warning. It can be argued that the entire wild plot is a story about a single character finding a way to understand and love herself. Readers get a clue near the end when the twins are describing the movie they plan to film. The female lead was to be played by Loretta Horoscope, the mother of Flynn's beloved. Rose-lima tells Flynn, "[Loretta] has up-dated herself. She has changed her name from Loretta to Daisy" (195). This is interesting, as Daisy is the name of Flynn's own mother. Flynn has fallen in love with herself. Later, Veronica confuses Samaria and Daisy when she asks, "How do I know which is the mother and which is the daughter? How can I know that for sure?" (211). Daisy's answer collapses all the versions of these women into one. Daisy says, "Find something to remind you of something else—perhaps a snapshot of me in a little woolen bathing suit, a bathing suit with a duck on it . . .. Or you can remember how I was. *I* remember how I was! A young girl in a porch swing on Valentine's Day eating candy hearts from a paper sack. . ." (211-12). Compare this image to the way readers meet Veronica at the start of the novel where she is on a swing, eating candy hearts. In the first scenes of the story "*Veronica* is the water baby standing in the shallows . . .. She is wearing a scratchy wool bathing suit appliqued above the heart with a single duck" (emphasis added). Daisy is Veronica. Veronica is Samaria. Veronica is everywhere, and so she is also Flynn, who is Bertha. Bertha Harris is the author of the novel *Lover* which readers watch Veronica write. Flynn is her own beloved. She is the artist. She is the forgery, and she is the original. She is, indeed, dazzling. All of these characters are versions of one woman. She creates all of these different selves in order to explore the various aspects of herself. In creating the performance of this novel, she finds a way to love herself, overcoming women's and lesbians' historical alienation by reassembling a segmented and fractured self.

There are many pieces that lead to this new understanding of self in *Lover*. In addition to the confusion created by twins, reflections, forgeries and disguises, the novel is bursting with an abundance of violence and horror. Sprinkled throughout the text, though, are the allusions to the story of St. Veronica; she invites readers to think back to the demise of the Gorgon, Medusa. It is, finally, Medusa who is able to pull the pieces of the story back together into a vital, active whole. In knowing the world more clearly, one can refuse to submit to the cuts that effectively separate the various aspects of self. Staying whole means holding on to the creativity that is required in order to see new ways to love.

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