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"She loves with love that cannot tire": The Image of the Angel in the House across Cultures and across Time

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Both our title quotation and the beatific figure who embodies such a selfless attitude are taken from the wildly popular and very sentimental nineteenth-century British poem entitled "The Angel in the House," in which Coventry Patmore describes his wife, whom he believed to be the ideal Victorian wife.¹ This figure came to represent nothing less than the ideal of womanhood in the age of Queen Victoria; and following the appearance of Patmore's poem, the term *Angel in the House* was used to refer to any woman of the period who embodied the ideal — the selflessly devoted and submissive wife and mother. It can be argued that in Spain, the angel-figure first appeared in a 1583 marriage manual entitled *La perfecta casada* (*The Perfect Wife*), by the religious, Fray Luis de León. But in a period when Victoriana and conduct manuals were popular, it is not surprising that the angel-figure reemerged in Spain through Victorian influence, as evidenced in María del Pilar Sinués de Marco's 1874 conduct manual entitled *El ángel del hogar*, for which Sinués borrowed Patmore's title verbatim. Sinués's work appeared in many editions through the beginning of the twentieth century, as confirmation of the high regard in which it was held.

The Angel has made an appearance in countless nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels, and famously, Virginia Woolf wanted nothing more than to kill this "phantom" as she wrote in her 1942 speech, "Professions for Women" (1384). Despite Woolf's efforts, the Angel's presence can still be detected today in venues ranging from women's magazines to popular film; we need only think of such publications as *Ladies' Home Journal* or *Good Housekeeping*, and of just about any film produced by Walt Disney. Clearly, although she is most closely associated with the nineteenth century, the Angel has managed to survive and thrive, in one manifestation or another, across cultures and into the twenty-first century.²

Indeed, the importance of the Angel in the House cannot be underestimated. She is the linchpin of marriage as it was imagined in the nineteenth century, of that venerable institution that Tony Tanner labels "the structure that maintains the Structure of bourgeois society" (15). That is, just as marriage is the prevailing mythology of bourgeois society, the very institution that underpins it and holds it together, so too, it can be argued, is the Angel in the House

the figure that upholds and sustains marriage. Clearly, the successful marriage was the basis for what was considered the model bourgeois domestic circumstance of the nineteenth century. A successful marriage to an appropriate wife was an important way by which a husband could confirm and demonstrate his "arrival" as it were, his newly-found economic and social accomplishments.³

From a feminist perspective, the social order being supported here by the institution of marriage and the angel-wife's place within it is most assuredly a conservative hierarchical one grounded in sexual repression within the patriarchy. By providing well-defined and religiously sanctioned social roles for both husband and wife, in combination with a dearth of viable alternatives for women, marriage creates and endorses a dichotomization of the sexes, reflected and advocated in popular and prescriptive literature of the time, that upholds as "natural" a distinction between masculine and feminine based on male dominance and female submission.

The nineteenth-century angel-woman was relegated to a different and much more confined sphere of influence than her husband. Whereas the man was permitted to enter the public world of business, his wife was limited to a private place within the realm of the family. She was expected to remain virtuous, pure, and untainted by the dangerous worldly contact with which her husband was necessarily involved. She was an asexual being whose task in life was, paradoxically, to produce children. She was required to maintain a harmonious atmosphere in the household; to provide spiritual support for her man; to tame his baser instincts; and to uphold the all-important bourgeois social values of order, peace, and happiness.

True, the angel-woman was granted superior authority in the areas of spirituality, sentiment, and emotion; but, despite much rhetoric to the contrary, the wife was in no way equal to her husband. Because she did not share in the man's corrupt material sphere, the woman was viewed merely as a domestic companion. She was worthy of respect and admiration, but only within her appropriate domain. Devoid of any real power or actual personhood, the woman is entangled in a struggle between personal authenticity and the dictates of society.

This process of domination and dehumanization through idealization does not outwardly degrade women. On the contrary, a superhuman ideal is created; the woman is placed on a pedestal and perceived, in social and literary settings, as nothing less than a fragile being embodying what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar call the "'eternal feminine' virtues of modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability, [and] politeness" (23). Perhaps her nature is best articulated by Woolf:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. . . . She sacrificed herself daily. . . ; in short, she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all . . . she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty — her blushes, her great grace. In those days — the last of Queen Victoria — every house had its Angel. (1385)

She is pure and innocent but also helpless, weak, and, importantly, silenced. This is indeed the ideal of womanhood and wifehood in the nineteenth century, the very embodiment of the term “Victorian.”

The Victorian era did not have a monopoly on the Angel in the House. Countless fictional women — from Penelope to Cinderella; from Shakespeare’s shrew, Kate, to Julia Roberts’s loveable prostitute in *Pretty Woman* — have been forced to negotiate the angel-woman legacy. The same applies to real flesh-and blood women, as seen in prescriptive literature spanning the years from the Bible to Martha Stewart. Even more blatantly, we must not forget the rather frightening governmentally-sanctioned revival of the angel-image in both Francoist Spain with *la Sección Femenina* (The Feminine Section) and Nazi Germany with *der Frauenbund* (The National Socialist Women’s Section).⁴

As Carolyn Heilbrun argues, “in literature and out, through all recorded history, women have lived by a script they did not write” (108). Instead, every step of the way from “Once upon a time” to “And they lived happily ever after” women have most often had an image imposed upon them, have had their tales written for them, and have merely played out their preconceived destinies until they were either married or dead. In any case, their stories were over.

Nonetheless, there have been authors across time and cultures who have chosen to explode the myth of the Angel in the House and her happy if very confining ending. Recognizing the need to examine more conscientiously the complexities of life and love, to relate life to plot and plot to life (Boone 72), some authors, mainly but not exclusively women, have subverted antiquated plot structures, opened up their endings in counter-traditional ways, and given their female characters less angelic demeanors, more alternatives, and a stronger voice with which to articulate their own destinies and champion their own authenticity.

While we have been discussing mainly nineteenth-century literary and cultural phenomena, one of the most striking examples of a destructive manipulation of the angel-myth is offered in the works of the seventeenth-century Spanish noblewoman, María de Zayas, a near contemporary of Cervantes and Shakespeare. In both of her collections of framed narratives, *Novelas amorosas*

y ejemplares from 1637 (*The Enchantments of Love: Amorous and Exemplary Novels*) and *Parte segunda del Sarao y entretenimiento honesto* (*Desengaños amorosos*) from 1647 (*The Disenchantments of Love*), Zayas subverts the traditional *novela cortesana* plot, common to both Cervantes and Shakespeare, in which handsome noble men and silent, defenseless, and angelic women overcome almost impossible odds in complicated baroque plots, finally to marry in happy endings. Zayas's versions of these tales are not nearly so blissful. Her women endure horrendous violence at the hands of the men who are charged with protecting them. Yet, they find their voice, defend themselves, and, in the end, often choose the convent, and the community of women it represents, over the marriage bed.⁵

In nineteenth-century Spain, author and feminist Emilia Pardo Bazán conceived other plots. In such short stories as "El encaje roto" ("Torn Lace"), "La boda" ("The Wedding"), "La punta del cigarro" ("The Cigarette Stub"), "El mundo" ("The World"), "Casi artista" ("Almost an Artist"), "Las vistas" ("The Trousseau"), and "Champagne," Pardo Bazán imagines a world in which female characters are more than Angels and may enjoy education and employment; in which marriage, the convent, or death are not the only options open to them; in which women control their own destinies often in the company of other women; in which even men understand the dangers of imposing limitations on women; in which even a prostitute is given a voice — a controversial move for a nineteenth-century female author.⁶

Speaking of prostitutes, and jumping across time and cultures, the popular 1990 film *Pretty Woman* offers an interesting if not entirely non-traditional example of a re-imagined angel-figure. All the elements of the fairy tale implied by the "happily-ever-after" motif are present here — but with a twist. In the final scene of the film, a city fire escape is transformed into a "maiden's" tower, a stretch limo into a white steed, and an umbrella into a knight's sword. As part of the subversion, our dashing prince has a very human flaw in his fear of heights — a flaw that he must overcome in order to rescue his love; and, true, our fairy-princess-angel is a prostitute, but an endearing one endowed with a voice she's not afraid to use, who rescues her prince right back.

Another popular film, *Shrek* (2001), portrays an angel-figure fit for the twenty-first century. At the outset, Fiona seems to fulfill all of the prerequisites of the proper fairy-princess angel. She is beautiful, charming and appropriately bedeviled by an evil spell. But this is a woman of dimensions completely unknown to the likes of Cinderella; she is a wise-cracking, butt-kicking kind of a girl who knows what she wants and takes guff from no man. In the long-standing tradition of the fair tale, her ending is still happily-ever-after, but it has also been exploded and subverted, completely re-imagined to

accommodate this angel-figure for modern times. As it turns out, the evil spell is the curse of beauty; the angel is an ogre. Yet, she still is rewarded with her happy ending.

It must not be construed as mere coincidence that there is a fusion of the Angel and the Fairy-Tale-Princess in these rather subdued subversions taken from North American films; North Americans love happy endings.⁷ Popular representations in other countries typically portray more transparent subversions of the angel-image. Even a film such as the innocent British comedy *Calendar Girls* (2003) depicts the staid English housewife in an entirely new (and nude) light — a woman completely unrecognizable to the likes of Patmore. And we would be remiss, in this context, not to mention the highly-original work of the Spaniard Pedro Almodóvar, a director who skewers social convention. Consider, for example, his rather bizarre 1984 black comedy, *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* (*What Have I Done to Deserve This?*), in which the almost prototypical *ángel del hogar*, Gloria, attempts to cope with the chaos of modern life — including a nasty husband, skilled in the forgery of Hitler's handwriting; a drug-dealing son; and an eccentric mother-in-law. That Gloria kills her husband to escape her fate unmistakably exposes the dysfunctional nature of the angel-image for modern times.

Across time and cultures, from Coventry Patmore and María del Pilar Sinúes de Marco to Pedro Almodóvar, from *Cinderella* to *Cosmopolitan* and *Desperate Housewives*, there has been an evolution of the angel-figure. Despite such modern conduct manuals such as *Martha Stewart Living*, generally speaking, a woman once silenced and subjugated is now lauded and liberated, as we are asked to question and re-evaluate all that we thought we knew and held dear about feminine beauty, conjugal happiness, contented domesticity and the Angel in the House.

Notes

1. The *Angel in the House* is a series of four books of verse: *The Betrothal* (1854); *The Espousals* (1856); *The Victories of Love*, Book I ("Faithful Forever") (1860); and *The Victories of Love*, Book II (1862). In 1863, all four books were revised and published as two volumes. See the articles of Bina Freiwald and Maurice Montabrut. Our title quotation comes from the first Prelude to Canto IX ("Sahara") of *The Betrothal* (Page 111).

2. For a differing perspective on the angel-figure, see the works of Heath Dillard and Elizabeth Langland. Both authors argue that, historically, women have had more power than is generally assumed.

3. Much of the definition of the angel-figure that follows is taken from my encyclopedia entry entitled "Ángel del hogar" (27-29), from *The Feminist Encyclopedia of Spanish Literature*,

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4. For information regarding *la Sección Femenina*, see Luis Otero. Concerning *der Frauenbund*, see Adolf Hitler's speech dated September 8, 1934 in Tracey J. Kinney's collection. Interestingly, the name *der Frauenbund* currently is used by both Catholic and Jewish women's organizations in Germany, the translation having been changed, to suit modern times, to "The Women's Federation."

5. See H. Patsy Boyer's excellent English translations of these works.

6. Many of these stories are superbly translated into English by María Cristina Urruela in "*Torn Lace*" and *Other Stories*, part of the MLA Texts and Translations Series. See my articles "Broken Fans," "Working Girls," "There Goes the Groom," and "Torn Lace" for discussion of Pardo Bazán's techniques of subversion in the stories mentioned.

7. Indeed, Disney's *Cinderella* — a most conventional portrayal of the princess-angel image — could not be more obvious, with its "And they lived happily ever after" written in ornamental script as the final shot of the film. For an intriguing and very modern take on the princess, see Peggy Orenstein's article.

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