

## Lady Lazarus in Gothic Gauze; Genre and Gender

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Like a deep woman, it hid a good deal; it had many faces, many delicate, terrible veils. It spoke miracles and distances; if it could court, it could also kill. (Plath, *Johnny Panic* 21)

Rising up with spiritualism in America, the Veiled Lady's filmy visage haunted the mid-nineteenth-century. She was the medium performing on stage, the neoclassical statue in public exhibitions, and she posed in model artist shows wearing a tight leotard behind gauzy veils. Her performance often involved spiritual possession, strange prophecies, and a titillating young body. Swooning and subdued under a male-mesmerist, the Veiled Lady's portrayal of idealized femininity established her popularity and her cultural significance (Goddu 97). Her diaphanous dress remains imprinted still upon the creative imagination of our artists, though the inner mechanisms of her metaphor have mutated over time. In 2007, she appeared as the drugged, cuffed and salacious young oracle in Zack Snyder's film, *300*. Her blood-red hair and nude body convulse in clouds of narcotic smoke, while her fingers curl to claws. The oracle is more than a flashy enactment of the Veiled Lady's performance. We understand her feminine passivity as intoxicated, chained, and her wild hair and nails create a tangibility never granted the Victorian Veiled Lady.

The oracle's bold imagery draws her closer to Sylvia Plath's recreation of the Veiled Lady's performance. Two of Plath's most distinguished pieces: "A Birthday Present" and "Lady Lazarus" should be recognized as the catalyst in this metaphorical refiguration. Plath's figures mirror the Veiled Lady's soft iridescence, but hide claws. And though the veils are toxic, her voices remain conscious, and having rid the stage of male-oppressors, Plath's speakers direct this gothic scene. In order to read and appreciate Plath's revisions, I will call up the Veiled Lady from Nathaniel Hawthorne's pages. By his original constructions, we can see how Plath's work hinges off in a new trajectory: what Hawthorne's novel wishes to deny, Plath's poems dramatize. Her extraordinary veils simultaneously expose and confirm America's anxieties concerning autonomous female sexuality and the artificiality of feminine performance.

Around 1840, anxious crowds began flocking to the Veiled Lady's performance. She floated about the stage, and spoke softly of the spiritual realm, appearing much like a heavenly creature. She seemed the ideal manifestation of womanhood: chaste, saintly, inhuman. Despite this holy facade, the Veiled Lady made her audience terribly uneasy; it was an uncanny, ghostly performance. Teresa Goddu's *Gothic America* examines this apparent paradox in the Veiled Lady's performance.

The mesmerized lady also reveals how the private sphere was created in and by the public sphere. The fact that the "essential passivity of women was asserted in the public arena, displayed before thousands of witnesses" marks the lady's central contradiction: she was both private woman and public performer (Braude 85). The medium represented the ideal of femininity as well as its corruption. Her inviolate yet visually penetrated body became the site of social disorder as well as social regulation. (98)

Goddu's argument provokes a basic, yet revealing question: how could the Veiled Lady be the "angel of the house" if she was displayed so salaciously upon the stage? This contradiction caused an incredible sense of instability in her performance. Goddu continues to assert that it was this lewd performance, posed for a consumer market that sullied the Veiled Lady's ideal femininity. But we should push the question further still. Perhaps it was not only frightening to see the Veiled Lady corrupted, but terrifying also to realize that her femininity was simply that: a performance. What the Veiled Lady revealed was that she was merely a creation of the public, and they were witnessing her act this prescribed role. This differs significantly from Goddu's depiction: jeopardized innocence is quite discomforting, but the complete fabrication of innocence might move the audience in sublime terror. If the veil was only a flimsy veneer of passivity and submission, then what has been hiding underneath? Is it a monster? Is it a whore? Hiding the woman's interior, or the "core" of her being, was precisely what thrilled and terrified imaginations' in the Veiled Lady's crowd.

Judith Butler's famous work on gender performance illustrates how such a display of disjointed sexual identity challenges the audiences' powerful attachment to biological essentialism. Drag becomes Butler's vivid example, as she points out how this performance draws clear distinctions between anatomical sex, gender identity and gender

performance. Through this dramatic fragmentation, drag dismantles the social fiction of gender's inner-truth: "As much as drag creates a unified picture of "woman"... it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (187). The disturbing nature of drag informs the dread of the Veiled Lady's audience; she too, distinguishes her sex from her gender by the veil. More specifically, she completely exaggerates the gender performance, while diminishing the fact of her sex. The Veiled Lady is all surface, a screen where culture has inscribed the proper feminine decorum. But her sex, her bodily features, are too indistinct and foggy on which to settle beliefs of a female essence. This lack of a stable center sparks the suspense, then, for viewers who wish to see the veil removed, and discover a beautiful young lady; it would confirm the necessary truth of femininity. She is not "imitating" ideal femininity, but her sex already owns femininity by its very nature.

Karen Halttunen's arguments show how this fear of gender performance was stirred up in the genteel parlor at home as well. "The middle-class parlor became the stage on which the 'true' woman performed her 'natural' role. Asked to exemplify sincere self-expression, the middle-class woman had to disavow the theatricality of her own performance... these women were asked by etiquette books to 'obey the sentimental injunction that there be no stage effect'" (101). The notion that wives had not thoroughly internalized feminine construction, but only presented a series of crafted illusions, horrified husbands. Pleading with their wives to be sincere stemmed from an insecurity related to that of the Veiled Lady's performance. It would be tragic if the wife's virtue was compromised in anyway, but to imagine there was no real virtue at all: unbearable. To perform femininity meant concealing a different truth, a secret inner-self, a self that may harbor resentment, imperfections and impure desire.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1859) is thematically centered on the Veiled Lady's stage, and illustrates thoroughly her influence upon the imagination. Here, for instance, Hawthorne's elusive and attractive, Zenobia, relates to us her legend of the silver veil, and we may see how excited and nervous crowds were to imagine what lay beyond the shimmering screen.

Some upheld, that the veil covered the most beautiful countenance in the world; others-and certainly with more reason, considering the sex of the Veiled Lady- that the face was the most hideous and horrible, and that this was her sole motive for hiding it. It was the face of a corpse; it was the head of a skeleton; it was a monstrous visage, with snaky locks, like Medusa's, and one great red eye in the centre of the forehead. Again, it was affirmed, that there was no single and unchangeable set of features, beneath the veil, but whosoever should be bold enough to lift it, would behold the features of that person, in all the world, who was destined to be his fate; perhaps he would be greeted by the tender smile of the woman whom he loved; or, quite as probable, the deadly scowl of his bitterest enemy would throw a blight over his life. (100-110)

Initially, what is interesting here is the assumption that simply because the Veiled Lady is a woman, she is inclined to conceal evil deformities. That she does, in fact, have something to hide. The reason being, I believe, is that the audience recognizes her status as an actress. Through her performance, she reveals idealized femininity to be a mere construction, and they feared the possibility that she will strip the construction and expose whatever has been molding underneath. Their imaginations then conceive of a most horrendous images. Yet, the unveiling consists of an ever-changing countenance, depending on the man's fate. Maybe this particular veiled woman was sincere, and there is nothing there but her simplicity and her smile. But also likely, and far more frightening, lurks the possibility that she resents her oppressed position, and plots a furtive act of revenge. This threat must have gained momentum when men gazed back to their innocent wives, suspicious now of something stirring just below the surface of her performative construction. It is far more difficult to imagine how women viewers must have responded to the performance. Having been thoroughly stripped of individual identity by Victorian values, the performance must have tottered between offensive and inspiring. Some women must have deemed the performance vulgar and threatening, for a disreputable actress to mimic ideal femininity meant also to insult it. But other women must have (secretly perhaps) admired and clung to the idea: there were inside parts. Just as the Freudian subconscious would soon exhibit, the possibility of dark continents terrifies and fascinates us.

Hawthorne's narrator, Mr. Coverdale, embeds this suspense in his descriptions of Priscilla: the young woman who will become known as the Veiled Lady. She is delicate, feminine, intriguing, but escapes to unknown depths.

They called her ghost-child, and said that she should indeed vanish, when she pleased, but could never, in her densest moments, make herself quite visible. The sun, at mid-day would shine through her; in the first gray of twilight, she lost all distinctness of her outline; and if you followed the dim thing into a dark corner, behold! She was not there. (187)

It seems as if this character physically embodies the veil. Her entire body is a translucent allusion. Her features wane, but never blush. There are mysterious depths to where she often disappears, yet may never fully remerge. This illustration persists in painting the Veiled Lady as a prisoner within her own existence. Often, Hawthorne insists young women were "enslaved" by the veil. Her ghostly features have now become a metaphor for the woman's restricted role in society. It is important to notice, however, that Hawthorne's character shows no signs of resentment or ill intentions. She is harmless, with never a suspicious sneer or gesture, far too insubstantial to retaliate or argue.

Though featureless and trapped as well, Plath's veiled subject in "A Birthday Present" seems terribly sinister. Her silvery figure appears as glowing as the Veiled Lady on the surface, but the surrounding imagery fuels it with malicious intent. Moreover, Plath upholds the stage effect, recreating and confirming the artificiality of idealized femininity under veils, yet smothered and arrested, her voices complain.

In the first lines of "A Birthday Present," Plath's speaker positions herself as part of an audience assuming an attitude of great curiosity and suspense. "What is this, behind the veil, is it ugly, is it beautiful? / It is shimmering, has it breasts, has it edges?" (206). Already we see traces of the Veiled Lady. Doubtless, this address is itself a sort of performance: the speaker will stage an event, a revelation for the reader. More importantly, the speaker's set of questions echo those posed among the Veiled Lady's audience. Before the present's contents are revealed, it has the potential to be anything. However attractive the outside appearance may be, there could be something utterly repulsive underneath. This grotesque quality in both the Veiled Lady and the gift inspire a suspenseful moment, in which the viewer's imagination explores dark possibilities.

Consequently, Plath's opening lines recreate the anxious rattling of the Veiled Lady's audience.

The formless shape of this gift also parallels images of the Veiled Lady. It is obviously not the neatly contained beribboned box our memories serve up from childhood birthday parties. This present glistens, concealing a feminine figure with "breasts" "bones" or a "pearl button" and is never entirely tangible, with no distinct "edges." We are encouraged to imagine anything, while seeing nothing: an attractive and terrifying experience for the speaker.

The tension noticeably rises when Plath builds the present's destructive powers within a soft and beautiful container. Much like the Veiled Lady's audience, we wait (and hope perhaps) for the being to wreck through her thin ribbons and wreak havoc. Note also, the speaker's complicated attraction to this violent possibility and the gift's grim promise.

I would have killed myself gladly that time any possible way.  
Now there are these veils, shimmering like curtains,

The diaphanous satins of a January window  
White as babies' bedding and glittering with dead breath. (206)

One reading of this passage would suggest that this gift is merely a reflection of the speaker's internal struggle. The speaker's suicidal fascinations dress death in attractive colors. However, there is a connection here to the Veiled Lady's audience, for their imaginations followed similar inclinations. They saw her sheer satin, and immediately sprung to monstrous visions of death and destruction: "tusk" and "ghost-column" (206). The Veiled Lady's costume seemed to be the site for all sorts of phobias. One man might imagine a red-eyed Cyclops, while the other draws up Medusa's hideous face. No matter the nightmare, the Veiled Lady could project them. Hawthorne does not suggest the audience is sick for imagining such things, but fearful and insecure, which certainly moves the imagination. Plath's imagery works similarly: coloring and reflecting fears back onto the observer.

Discovering images of cultural anxiety within the Veiled Lady's gown may be better understood through Karen Horney's psychoanalytic theories dealing with the fear of the female body. In "The Dread of Woman: Observations on a Specific Difference in

the Dread Felt by Men and by Women Respectively for the Opposite Sex," she contends the vagina, that dark and undiscovered cavernous space, causes men to be shamefully afraid. Horney finds the basis for this argument in Freudian castration theory, and though it is questionable analysis at best, it nevertheless provides us valuable entry in examining this strange cultural tendency.

Horney finds that this dread is made evident through the haunting black abyss in patients' dreams.

I need only give the merest outline of them e.g., a motorcar is rushing along and suddenly falls into a pit and is dashed to pieces; a boat is sailing in a narrow channel and is suddenly sucked into a whirlpool; there is a cellar with uncanny, blood-stained plants and animals; one is climbing a chimney and is in danger of falling and being killed. (141)

Feminist critics have long since denounced the idea of the female body as non-space. Abysmal imagery that likens vaginas to "chimneys" is both terribly inaccurate and derogatory. Moreover, there is a blaring contradiction in this Freudian logic: if the vagina is completely void, then how is it capable of producing such nightmares? There is something confounding about the cultural and psychological inclination to associate the unknown and unseen with tremendous violence. Horney seems to suggest, through metaphor, that the stark architecture of a woman's body actually creates these outlandish phobias. Within the cellar of a female's body, lurk more frightening and fatal disasters. This might explain the nervousness of the Veiled Lady's crowd. Her unknown identity, and her unseen face, immediately congeal and fester into one belligerent figure in their minds. Rather than producing terrors, the Veiled Lady merely reflects the audience's fears back upon themselves; she becomes whatever their minds have the courage to muster up. Furthermore, as she reveals femininity to be a feeble construction, with nothing distinctly tangible inside, the viewers' imaginations are allowed to hollow her out, and deposit their nightmares. Plath's poem demonstrates that she was keenly aware of this system of reflections, and we are reminded of her description of the present: "the mirrory variety of it" (207). Indeed, all images of the veil as silvery or shimmery suggest its innate ability to reflect. With this in mind, we can imagine how the veiled figures recreate cultural anxieties in a monstrous mirror. That is, of course, until the veil is actually lifted.

This moment marks the beginning of Plath's dramatic revision on the Veiled Lady's gothic role. Unlike Hawthorne, whose two climatic unveilings in *The Blithedale Romance* reveal a fragile and beautiful young woman, Plath is far less willing to comfort her readers or submerge the poem in sentimentality. Her veiled object does not shine in holy light, but sicken and smother the speaker.

If you only knew how the veils were killing my days  
To you they are only transparencies, clear air.

But my god, the clouds are like cotton.  
Armies of them. They are carbon monoxide. (207)

These lines stand in blaring contrast to Hawthorne's romantic veil imagery:

It was white, with somewhat of a subdued silver sheen,  
like the sunny side of a cloud; and falling over the wearer,  
from head to foot, was supposed to insulate her from the  
material world, from time and space, and to endow her  
with the many privileges of a disembodied spirit. (6)

Hawthorne's cloud imagery serves to illustrate the ethereal and sublime nature of the Veiled Lady; this picturesque vision allows us see her as vulnerable and virginal. Plath's cloud resists such sweet associations, and slowly suffocates the speaker. For Hawthorne, the Veiled Lady's disguise, restricting and attractive, exemplifies her femininity. In Plath's vision, the veil is toxic and contagious. If we are to accept the veil as a symbol for the prescribed performance of femininity, then Plath's work likens such prescriptions to deadly smoke. In this way, the speaker seems to be inviting us to experience the stifling sensation of being under the veil. Unlike Hawthorne's Veiled Lady, who sits at a relatively safe distance on the stage, Plath smothers her speaker in the veil, and by effect, smothers her readers. It is also significant that the speaker seems less troubled by the mysterious contents of the gift, then with its mask. Though curious, she is prepared enough for anything: "Can you not see I do not mind what it is" (206). And unlike the Veiled Lady's audience, she is not afraid. She is "ready for enormity" (207). But the *you* in the poem is far more terrified of the contents than the veil. For this gift-giving character, the veil seems as healthy and natural as "clear air" though he is too frightened to stick around for the unveiling.



I know why you will not give it to me,  
You are terrified

The world will go up in a shriek, and your head with it. (207)

We might begin by asking why the speaker assumes the *you* of the poem is terrified of his own gift? If he were indeed the one to wrap it, why is he so nervous and threatened? One answer, of course, is his laughable cowardice, and that Plath is making a joke. But if we were to follow the gothic metaphor, we will find that Plath is continuing to revise the veil.

This narrative, in which a man<sup>1</sup> veils a gift, but is too anxious to watch the woman open it, may render an allegorical reading: patriarchy has succeeded in confining and glorifying womanhood within our domestic sphere, but having sealed up her individual desires and ambitions, they fear her inside parts have molded and festered into abominable shapes. If a woman were to open, it would be a catastrophe of mythical proportions, perhaps comparable only to Pandora's box. "The world will go up in a shriek, and your head with it."

The caustic attitude and humor of this speaker marks a pivotal shift in Plath's poetry. In Susan R. Van Dyne's, *Revising Life*, she highlights this poem as the beginning of Plath's famous creative flood in the fall of 1962. "In late September, Plath drafted the poems that sought to reclaim a powerful poetic voice for herself...Beginning with 'A Birthday Present'" (9). The power Van Dyne praises lies not only in Plath's bold and haunting imagery, but in the complex and colorful masquerade of voices. The speaker in "A Birthday Present," as well as the imagined voice of the present, creates a charged and energetic conflict. These are not the enslaved voices of Hawthorne's veil. Though his Priscilla holds mysterious powers, she never speaks for or about her self. "I am blown about like a leaf...I never have any free-will" (171). For Hawthorne, the lady is just as foggy as her veil. So unclear and insubstantial, this woman is always under someone's control. No determination, no independent voice. On the contrary, Plath's veiled figures are astonishingly self-aware and, in the words of Van Dyne, even "bitchy" (62).

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<sup>1</sup> Since this poem was composed directly after "Burning the Letters" and "For a Fatherless Son," critics have often read the figure as Ted Hughes. For my purposes here, I only wish to accept the *you* as a masculine character, and read the conflict within the confines of heterosexual marriage.

While the speaker of "A Birthday Present" moves about her kitchen, she imagines the gift passing lofty and condescending judgments. It is important and telling to remember that it is still the speaker who creates this voice within her imagination. This seems to suggest that the veiled voice poses as her unconscious in the scene: a voice that exposes her inner struggles and frustrations in the domestic realm.

Is this the elect one, the one with black eye-pits and a scar?

Measuring flour, cutting off the surplus,  
Adhering to rules, to rules, to rules.

Is this the one for the annunciation? (206)

What attracts my interest here is Plath's choice of the word "annunciation." Our imagination initially draws up the Virgin Mary, but there is something uncanny about this angel. Instead of the beautiful and placid face of Gabriel, we get a sneering, disdainful messenger. Plath's veiled figure is some angelic being, but certainly not the angel of the house, as prescribed by the nineteenth-century. Priscilla would never criticize her position in the domestic; she is not conscious enough to do so. But Plath's veiled voice is fully aware and spiteful. She establishes independence from the domestic setting, and denounces the speaker's conformity to it. Repetition of the word "rules" illustrates the kitchen scene as tedious and tyrannical and the speaker as a whipped laborer.

Here too, Plath blankets readers within the veil, so we may see through the horrible screen. From here we find the speaker scarred and her eyes plucked. These images seem to work as symbols for the speaker's blind enslavement and her traumatic past. The veil allows us to see into our speaker; we understand her darkness and pain. In this way, her secrets are revealed to us.

This power was attributed to The Veiled Lady, but Plath has dramatically rewritten her script, and switched the perspective.

Hidden things were visible to her, (at least, so the people inferred from obscure hints, escaping unawares out of her mouth,) and silence was audible. And, in all the world, there was nothing so difficult to be endured, by those who had any dark secret to conceal, as the glance of Priscilla's timid and melancholy eyes. (207)

Hawthorne's Veiled Lady is nothing but a passive vehicle through which the supernatural communicates with the living world. The spiritual world is granted an exposed view of humans, while humans are allowed to glimpse into the sublime. Unlike Plath's character, the Veiled Lady has absolutely no control over the passing information. She is merely a portal, while Plath's figure is part of an ongoing conversation between the two worlds. The personality Plath creates is judgmental and full of cynical remarks. Plath's "bitchy" revisions amount to a veiled woman more threatening and terrifying. She has an independent mind, and it is impossible to imagine her with "timid and melancholy eyes."

"A Birthday Present" offers us a portrait of the Veiled Lady; there is something very much alive and malicious within the confines of her custom. Though monstrous woman feared in the nineteenth-century makes her self felt in this poem, she will not fully emerge until "Lady Lazarus." Plath alludes to her terrible unveiling here at the close of "A Birthday Present."

If it were death

I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes.  
I would know you were serious.

There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday. (208)

These lines mirror the organizing narrative in "Lady Lazarus." The veil is peeled back to reveal a woman's destructive and restorative power. There will be a death and a resurrection, a birthday. Finally, audience members are swept up and consumed in the poem's deathbed scene. Through these dramatic revisions of the Veiled Lady's performance, Plath redesigns America's nineteenth-century nightmare. Her femininity, thin as a napkin, slides off to release, not a monster necessarily, but a newly defined female character.

Despite Plath's bold transformations, critics have often dismissed Lady Lazarus's performance as powerless. Kathleen Lant, in particular, claims Plath's work is arrested entirely by the dominating discourses of her time. Every instance in which Plath reveals a naked female body, Lant attempts to highlight victimization and vulnerability.

"Lady Lazarus" presents most clearly one of the central problems with Plath's use of the metaphor of nakedness, for in this poem Plath refers to this act of unclothing as "The big

strip tease." And in this act, no woman is terrifying, no woman triumphant, no woman is powerful, for she offers herself to "the peanut-crunching crowd" in a gesture that is "theatrical" rather than self-defining, designed to please or to appease her viewers more than to release herself. (653)

It would be difficult, and perhaps not worth our while, to argue that Plath was attempting to define herself or "release" herself from oppression. What astonishes me is Lant's assumption that because the scene is "theatrical" it cannot be meaningful or liberating. When we place "Lady Lazarus" within its gothic tradition, we see immediately that this poem is not a show at a local gentleman's club, but a supernatural female performing in drag. The speaker slides out of her mortal skin, and stages the sublime. Certainly, Plath's strip tease is far more complicated than Lant suggests, as she rewrites a character, a genre, and metaphorically abolishes women's limitations. Plath's Veiled Lady is released, liberated, and appropriates male power. In order to illustrate this point adequately, it would be necessary to look again towards Hawthorne's Priscilla, and examine her stage performance in more detail.

Right before Mr. Coverdale discovers Priscilla is the mysterious Veiled Lady, he finds their mutual friend, Zenobia, has dressed Priscilla in proper attire. She is draped from head to toe in a gauzy white fabric. For Coverdale, the dress glows magnificently, accentuating her black hair and shy dark eyes. Never before had he fully recognized Priscilla's beauty. "She is a wonderful creature, 'I said.' Ever since she came among us, I have been dimly sensible of just this charm which you have brought out. But it was never absolutely visible till now. She is as lovely as a flower!" (169). The whiteness of Priscilla's gown attracts Coverdale. She seems to him as virginal and precious as a flower, and as conscious as one too. Zenobia manipulates Priscilla's beauty, so again, Priscilla is portrayed as foggy and unaware. But she becomes more desirable in this moment because of her glowing virtue. For her passivity and purity, Coverdale finally discovers his sexual attraction.

Goddu explores this ironic attraction as part of the central contradiction in the Veiled Lady's performance.

Mediums were taken over by spirits and male mesmerists  
and voyeuristically consumed by their audience. Their

commercial connections were depicted in sexual terms: since they relinquished their bodies for pay, mediums were viewed as promiscuous and likened to prostitutes (Braude 124). In her guise as the material body on display, the medium symbolized the marketplace: her commodified body was exchanged between men; moreover, her psychic enslavement to the mesmerist suggests her alliance to another market economy, slavery. (98)

Complete control over the Veiled Lady's mind and body reaffirmed the dominating discourses of ideal femininity and womanhood, but because she exemplified this passivity in the public arena, she was a prostitute and a slave. Again, for Goddu, it was the consumable nature of the performance that corrupted her. But it is important to realize that all of the traits bestowed upon the ideal woman suddenly become abject when she reveals their performative nature. Again, I would argue the stage elevates and exposes social anxieties. Perhaps she is not as docile and chaste as her performance suggests. Once this suspicion arises, they may harbor secret anxieties about female sexuality. Her modesty, her submission: a potential fraud. With the veil lifted, there may stand a naked, uncommitted, sexually voracious woman.

Fear of female sexuality maintains a strong undercurrent throughout Hawthorne's description of Priscilla's performance. The climax occurs when the male mesmerist, or "Professor" as Coverdale refers to him, loses his composure when the Veiled Lady suddenly acts against his commands. He proclaims before the audience that it were impossible for her to lift the veil or arise from her chair, when suddenly, the Veiled Lady stands up, and the audience is aghast. "The spectators, it may be, imagined that she was about to take flight into that invisible sphere, and to the society of those purely spiritual beings, with whom they reckoned her so near akin" (202). With this single act of defiance, it seemed reasonable to expect an almost apocalyptic occasion. If she can rise from a chair without the Professor's command, she can fly above their heads and break all earthly boundaries. It seems that the audience is just waiting for the Veiled Lady to astonish them with hidden powers and determined independence.

Once Priscilla has stood up from the chair, and thoroughly startling everyone, we see a new male character on stage. Hollingsworth, a man in love with Priscilla, and Coverdale's rival, breaches the platform and calls out to Priscilla: "'Come!' said he,

waving his hands towards her. 'You are safe!'" (203). Immediately she throws off the veil, and stunned by her place and by all the eyes upon her, "She uttered a shriek and fled to Hollingsworth, like one escaping from her deadliest enemy, and was safe forever!" (203).

This is the second unveiling in *The Blithedale Romance*. In the first narrative, told by Zenobia, the Veiled Lady is incapable of removing her veil. The young man who insisted upon knowing her identity had to unmask her. So what is startling, perhaps about this scene is the instance in which Priscilla swiftly shed the veil with her own hand. This shows more fortitude than we have ever seen from her. Yet what is predictable still is the moment when Priscilla simply moves from one controlling male figure to the next. Hollingsworth achieves a noble exit, benefiting from her idealized femininity within the sanction of marriage. The scene is comparable to classic comedies and fairy tales: the overbearing and wicked father loses his daughter at the hands of a new heroic suitor. Rare scenes in which the female character is on her own, without an authority or a lover, she often appears as dazed as Priscilla does the moment after she removes the veil, and before she runs into the man's arms. She is only a commodity. Hawthorne is merely following the accepted narrative here, and reaffirming middle-class social norms.

In a similar fashion, Coverdale proclaims his faith in Priscilla's incorruptible purity. "Blazoned abroad as a wonder of the world, and performing what were adjudged as miracles- in faith of many, a seeress and a prophetess- in the harsher judgment of others, a mountebank- she had kept, as I religiously believe, her virgin reserve and sanity of soul, throughout it all" (203). Priscilla has been part of a rather compromising and scandalous transaction; her body and mind were entirely possessed, though Coverdale wishes to believe she has not been damaged in the process. Just as he had once seen her, Priscilla remains virginal and completely vulnerable. But there is something strange here: Coverdale seems to be convincing himself and his contemporary readers of Priscilla's chastity. This defense is how Hawthorne chose to close the chapter. Coverdale's religious belief appropriately concludes the scene because readers might have feared a number of things. By lifting her veil, Priscilla was metaphorically liberating herself from the domestic sphere and constructed femininity. Her inner-self and secret desires are now completely unpredictable. But Hawthorne reassures us of her "true" feminine nature by running Priscilla happily, and of her own volition, back into the domestic sphere and

heterosexual marriage. In the arms of Hollingsworth, and through Coverdale's desperate testimony, Priscilla reestablishes and confirms her feminine truth and virtue.

With these scenes in mind, we may then turn back to Plath's "Lady Lazarus" with a greater understanding of her gothic conventions and revisions. Just as with "A Birthday Present," the veiled subject is disguised, and is not directly introduced as the Veiled Lady. Yet Lady Lazarus is unmistakably a performer upon the stage. Before we experience her talents, however, we notice that she has appropriated her name from a well-known, biblical miracle. Lazarus, resurrected by Jesus from his dark tomb, walked amongst the living. With this image in mind, we imagine Lady Lazarus stripping from her shroud before us. This gender combination directly influences the power struggle that will persist throughout the poem. As Robert C. Allen argues in his work, *Horrible Prettiness*, female performers in masculine garments draw up strong suggestions concerning sexuality, power and gender roles.

Burlesque performers also literally usurped male power by taking on male role on stage...However, female burlesque performers were never trying to present a convincing, realistic portrayal of a man onstage. Instead, they were utilizing their masculine attire as a sort of fetish object, in fact emphasizing their feminine sexuality by contrasting it with markers of masculinity... these practices, of course, ultimately emphasized the constructed nature of both genders, calling into questions accepted gender roles themselves. (29)

It is true that we never imagine the speaker of the poem as a man. The images associated with her are distinctly feminine: "a smiling woman" (244). Yet, her title is famously masculine, and her story taken from sacred text; this seems to elevate her status in our imaginations. She is monumental, canonical, and a woman. Already, Lady Lazarus has surpassed Priscilla in initiative and strength. In this way, "usurping male power" becomes a dominant theme throughout Lady Lazarus's performance. The veil maintains its metaphorical context of feminine construction, and stripping it demonstrates Lady Lazarus's purpose and desire. She intends to release the Veiled Lady from her prescribed role in the gothic genre, and womanhood from the domestic sphere.

"Lady Lazarus" does not simply lift the veil, however. In her opening lines, we see Lady Lazarus not only unwrapping the shimmering mask, but her own white skin.

A sort of walking miracle, my skin  
Bright as a Nazi Lampshade,  
My right foot

A paperweight,  
My face a featureless, fine  
Jew linen,

Peel off the napkin (244)

It is interesting to see the metaphor systematically link linen with victim, while her skin beneath is paired to infamous malice. This sets the Veiled Lady's stage: her delicate features could slip to a bloody disgrace with a single hand gesture. But while the Holocaust metaphor creates colossal conflict between veil and skin, the imagery of both are nearly indistinguishable. They both appear bright, weightless, and blurred in white light. When Lady Lazarus "peels off the napkin," she seems to strip her white skin along with the veil. There is something very literal in the way Plath illustrates it; we imagine the brittle layers coiling back in this opening scene, leaving behind only: "The nose, the eye-pits, the full set of teeth? / The sour breath" (244). She simultaneously sheds feminine construction, her physical body, and all the monstrous myths. This brings us to a place unseen in the Veiled Lady's performance. Lady Lazarus appears on the same stage, but her character is wildly unpredictable and refuses to abide by the established gothic narrative.

If Plath were to accept the Veiled Lady's limitations, her speaker would appear neither aware nor assertive. But she does not share center stage, or take orders from a male power figure. She seems to be the announcer, ticket-taker, performer and director.

And there is a charge, a very large charge  
For a word or a touch  
Or a bit of blood (246)

On a Veiled Lady's stage, "the Professor" would be exploiting the unconscious woman in such a manner, but Plath's speaker seems in control. Lady Lazarus takes full advantage of the commercial benefits of the male gaze. The speaker dissects her body before them and



assigns the price; she is both seller and product. As Goddu clarifies, part of the horror involved in the Veiled Lady's performance was the audiences' realization that the ideal woman was indeed created by the marketplace and commodified. Again, Plath exposes and confirms these fears, but she is not a passive part of the transaction. Lady Lazarus may not be consumed whole, as Priscilla seemed to be through the audience's voyeuristic gaze. This scene also reveals Lady Lazarus's sexuality as mere performance. Unlike the Veiled Lady, the uncanny contradiction of private woman on public display is far from subtle. In Hawthorne's words, the performer here has not maintained her "virgin reserve." Rather, Lady Lazarus has openly embraced her role of exhibitionist; an essential part of the Veiled Lady's performance, though never admitted to.

This is not to suggest that Lady Lazarus is completely free from oppressive male authorities. In Van Dyne's study of Plath's numerous revisions, she noticed that Plath was consistently dealing with images of male figures to which she was identified as dependent.

In the worksheets, the ire of this poem is directed not at the monolithic brute of "Daddy" but at multiple forms of male authority; many more are named in the drafts than in the finished poem: enemy, professor, executioner, priest, torturer, doctor, God, Lucifer. What Lady Lazarus suffers is not male brutality but the gendered asymmetry of her relationship to power in which her role is always defined as dependent and defective: to male professor she is student; to executioner, criminal; to priest, sinner; to doctor, patient. (54)

The published version, however, is not so riddled with these figures. Consequently, Lady Lazarus achieves a rather dominating presence in the final draft; she is capable of transcending her struggle as a dependent. Plath removes the "Professor," which may remind us of Priscilla's antagonistic male mesmerist, therefore ridding the scene of any figure that could usurp credit for her amazing talents. The figures Plath keeps in print: doctor, enemy, God and Lucifer – all serve a significant purpose in her speaker's transformation. These subjects seem to trace her journey into the spiritual realm and back. They may be understood, in part, as markers. Before Lady Lazarus reduces her self to ashes, she addresses earthly beings.

So, so Herr Doktor.  
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,  
I am your valuable (246)

A contradiction here lies in the care a doctor is supposed to provide, and the harm an enemy may cause the body. There is an intense internal conflict, and a complicated power struggle inherent in the repeated words, "I am your..." This conflict may be easily attributed to Plath's heterosexuality, as she is erotically dependent upon those figures who oppress her. Yet *Doktor* and *Enemy* are more directly associated with the physical body, rather than romantic love. They are sources of healing and pain, disease and death. These figures gain control of the speaker's body only for an instant. She is their creation, their possession. But she succeeds in escaping their hold through the destruction of her physical body. The, final "shriek" here may remind us of the catastrophic "shriek" in "A Birthday Present." For Plath, the word seems to appropriately mark the end of something tangible, a noise to echo through a concluding image. The featureless speaker we kept in such a formless vision has vanished entirely.

Yet when she rises from out of the remnants of her earthly life: "A cake of soap, / A wedding ring, / A gold filling," she speaks to and threatens rulers of the spiritual world (246). The brief catalogue of physical items all share a cosmetic quality. They could be considered articles that make some sort of correction or completion: cleansing, financial security, society's approval, a sparkling smile. But Lady Lazarus rises above, leaving them behind. This may be because the items are tied to the body, and are only temporary; fillings fall out, marriages often dissolve, we get dirty again. Far unlike the biblical miracle, Lady Lazarus's metaphorical resurrection leaves the body, and the trivial things we do to repair it, in a pile of ash. We may not escape here the harrowing image of the Holocaust ovens.<sup>2</sup> Hollywood has conditioned us well to imagine and dwell on detail: shoe, shadowed ribs, a missing-tooth. Out of the decay, she prepares to enter the spiritual world.

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<sup>2</sup> I wish not to defend or criticize Plath's appropriation of the Holocaust. Making a contribution to this long-standing and important debate would distract entirely from my analysis here.

Through this transformation, Plath's speaker achieves a sort of transcendence. Lant would challenge this assertion, as she sees Plath's work as far too embodied to achieve transcendence. But in this moment, we see the speaker shedding her body and all restrictions set upon the female character in the gothic tradition. For the Veiled Lady may enter the spiritual realm, but she would have no voice. The spirits speak through the woman, without any active participation from her. Lady Lazarus, though, in her disembodied form, speaks to the Lords of Good and Evil with her own tremendous and strange prophesy.

Here, we lose sight of the stage, of the body, the performance. Plath has taken us into a space where we could only imagine the Veiled Lady travelled to during her cataleptic trance. We glimpse it for just a moment, before we are whipped back into our seats to witness the infamous reincarnation of Lady Lazarus. "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" (247). Perhaps what chills us the most here is Plath's remarkable control amidst chaotic climax. The lines are stark, succinct, the rhyme simple and sensuous. And the demand for interpretation is so great; we have conjured up countless readings.

Let me offer yet another: having destroyed the boundaries of the Veiled Lady's dramatic role, and the metaphor which imprisoned her within the domestic sphere, Lady Lazarus rises up, tangible and ripe, to consume male power and male authorship. She will not be devoured whole, as the Veiled Lady was by her audiences' gaze, but will turn the figurative table so that she becomes the one ingesting. This may be understood as sexually empowering and liberating, but we should notice too how Plath seems to gain respectability as a gothic writer. Having redesigned traditional conventions, in this final gesture, we might imagine her consuming literary fame, along with all the threatening male critics in her audience.

This immortal model of the Veiled Lady is still staging her resurrection. Her smoky frame emerged recently in an edition of *Plath Profiles*. Linda Kosciewicz-Fleming, a visual artist, titled one of her more startling pieces "Lady Lazarus." Fleming's work is "concerned with transience, life, death and associations between femaleness, the colour white and cloth" (340). As with most of her images, "Lady Lazarus" presents Fleming's naked body behind a sheer white veil. Her features are blurred in light and the

veil's dramatic shadow. Fleming revives the female phantom from nineteenth-century America, but her deviant head-tilt, and the suggestive gap between her legs bind Fleming's art much closer to Plath. For Plath's dramatic revisions metaphorically unveiled the woman, her barriers, allowing the contemporary artist to proceed and explore. We will see her again.

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