Coming Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative, and Principles of Pleasure

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Here are two sides, and only half the argument.
Athena, in *The Eumenides*

I WOULD LIKE to begin with the proposition that female orgasm is unnecessary. I am not, of course, saying that it is unnecessary to any particular woman that she experience orgasm or, for that matter, to any particular man that his female partner do so; rather, I mean that women's orgasm and, by extension, women's pleasure can be extraneous to that culmination of heterosexual desire which is copulation. Women's pleasure can take place outside, or independent of, the male sexual economy whose pulsations determine the dominant culture, its repressions, its taboos, and its narratives, as well as the "human sciences" developed to explain them. Considering the last decade's preoccupations with sexual difference and the pleasure of the text, it is surprising that theories concerned with the relation between narrative and pleasure have largely neglected to raise the issue of the difference between women's and men's reading pleasures. But this question seems to require critical tools that, for reasons I explore in this essay, have not been available. Indeed, the same analytic paradigms that give us professional access to texts have already determined the terms in which we accede to, comply with, or resist the coercions of a cultural program for pleasure that is not interested in—and whose interests may be threatened by—the difference of women's pleasure. If this paper does no more than get us as far as the giddy brink of an alternative to this cultural program, it will, I hope, suggest the magnitude of the resistances to this alternative as well as possible strategies for engaging them.

I

But, first, let us return to the question of orgasm. We all know what male orgasm looks like. It is preceded by a visible "awakening, an

arousal, the birth of an appetency, ambition, desire or intention." The male organ registers the intensity of this stimulation, rising to the occasion of its provocation, becoming at once the means of pleasure and culture's sign of power. This energy, "aroused into expectancy," takes its course toward "significant discharge" and shrinks into a state of quiescence (or satisfaction) that, minutes before, would have been a sign of impotence. The man must have this genital response before he can participate, which means that something in the time before intercourse must have aroused him. And his participation generally ceases with the ejaculation that signals the end of his arousal. The myth of the afterglow—so often a euphemism for sleep—seems a compensation for the finality he has reached.

Before I proceed to hypothesize the pleasure of his female mate, I must account for the quotation marks in the previous paragraph. The words used to describe the trajectory of male arousal ("awakening, an arousal, the birth of an appetency, ambition, desire or intention" on the one hand and "significant discharge" on the other) are taken from Peter Brooks's influential "Freud's Masterplot" (*Reading* 90–112), which examines the relation between Freud's plotting of the life trajectory in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and the dynamics of beginnings, middles, and ends in traditional narrative. Brooks's articulation of what are ultimately the oedipal dynamics that structure and determine traditional fictional narratives and psychoanalytic paradigms is brilliant, and it reminds us, in case we had forgotten, what men want, how they go about trying to get it, and the stories they tell about this pursuit. But it seems clear that a narratology based on the oedipal model would have to be profoundly and vulnerably male in its assumptions about what constitutes pleasure and, more insidiously, what this pleasure looks like; even Freud was troubled by his theory's inadequate explanation of female experience. Yet the gender bias of contemporary narratology seems not to have troubled our profession's most prominent practitioners of narrative theory and advocates of textual pleasure. Is it that the assumptions about narrative theory and the pleasure of the text that seem obvious to me are somehow not available to them? If they were conscious that the narrative dynamics and the erotics of reading they were expounding were specifically tied to an ideology of representation derivable only from the dynamics of male sexuality, would they not at least feel uncomfortable making general statements about "narrative," "pleasure," and "us"?

When I came upon the following passage—thanks to Teresa deLauretis, who cites it in *Alice Doesn't*—I realized that the problem was not that the narratologists were blind but that I was naive. In "The Orgastic Pattern of Fiction," Robert Scholes writes:

> The archetype of all fiction is the sexual act. In saying this I do not mean merely to remind the reader of the connection between all art and the erotic in human nature. . . . For what connects fiction—and music—with sex is the fundamental orgastic rhythm of tumescence and detumescence, of tension and resolution, of intensification to the point of climax and consummation. In the sophisticated forms of fiction, as in the sophisticated practice of sex, much of the art consists of delaying climax within the framework of desire in order to prolong the pleasurable act itself.
> (Scholes, *Fabulation* 26; deLauretis 108)

It comes as no surprise that Scholes, after reminding us that all fictional romance conforms to this model, crowns the novel as the "high art" manifestation of this universal pattern and claims for that genre the task of adapting the "'low atavistic' form, the orgastic story, to the job of spreading the news, telling the truth about man in society" (27). A refresher course in the fundamentals of structuralism should suffice to remind us that the "erotic in human nature" has to be understood within its various determining contexts if the concept is to be productive (what is "the erotic"? how do we define the "human nature" in which we locate "the erotic"? is "human nature" a cultural ["human"] or a biological ["nature"] construct?). And even if we have become wary of the generic "man in society," we still might need to be reminded that such generalizations in such contexts indicate that the pleasure the reader is expected to take in the text is the pleasure of the man. This would seem to be true even when—as Calvino's great novel of reading, *If on a winter's night a traveler*, suggests—the pleasure of the (pro-

jected) male author (or his surrogate, the critic) is heightened by the fantasy that the reader is a woman. Scholes continues:

> Like the sexual act, the act of fiction is a reciprocal relationship. It takes two. Granted, a writer can write for *his* own amusement, and a reader can read in the same way [note the finesse with which the male generic is suspended here]; but these are acts of mental masturbation, with all the limitations that are involved in narcissistic gratification of the self. . . . The meaning of the fictional act itself is something like love. The writer, at *his* best, respects the dignity of the reader. . . . (27; my emphasis)

Figures, of course, will insist on their own economies, and it is not long before Scholes's reader becomes a man, and the act of pleasure becomes, despite the orgastic language of his foreplay, a "marriage of true minds," a platonized, legalized, entirely male circuit of desire:

> The reader . . . respects the dignity of the writer. He does not simply try to take *his* pleasure and *his* meaning from the book. He strives to mate with the writer, to share the writer's viewpoint, to come fully to terms with the sensibility and intelligence that have informed this particular work of fiction. When writer and reader make a "marriage of true minds," the act of fiction is perfect and complete. (27; *his* emphasis)

I doubt that Scholes is conscious of or celebrating the profound homoerotic—or homoaesthetic—subtext in these passages, although its emergence in his discussion precisely at the moment when he articulates the relation between his reading and sexual pleasures might explain why the issue of women's reading pleasure has not attracted the attention it should: for the male critic, the sexual pleasure of reading would seem to take place within a nexus of homosocial arrangements in which "the marriage of true minds" is an affair "between men," as Eve Sedgwick has put it. In this system, woman is neither an independent subjectivity nor a desiring agent but, rather, an enabling position organizing the social fiction of heterosexuality. In its honest outrageousness, Scholes's erotics of reading makes clearer than does Brooks's more subtle articulation that the patriarchy has a simultaneously blind and enlightened investment both in the forms of its pleasure and in its conscious valorization and less conscious mystification of them.[1] And this realization does nothing but make it all the more frightening to contemplate the obstacles our own education has placed in the way both of women's conceiving (of) their own pleasure and of men's conceding that female pleasure might have a different plot.

For if we do now pursue the analogy between the representability of the sex act and a possible erotics of reading, we find a woman's encounter with the text determined by a broad range of options for pleasure that have *nothing to do* (or can choose to have nothing to do) with the notions of representability crucial to the narratologies of Brooks, Scholes, and, I dare say, others. I might point out, however, that it is exactly what I see as a potentially—but not necessarily—liberating relation to representability that has allowed the entire issue of female pleasure to go unacknowledged or to be entirely misconstrued for as long as it has. Everything that the last two decades have taught us about human sexual response suggests that the female partner in intercourse has accesses to pleasure not open to her male partner. It is, of course, a commonplace that she can fake pleasure. But she can also (like Mme de Merteuil in Laclos's *Les liaisons dangereuses*) fake frigidity. Without endangering her partner's ultimate "success," she can begin her own arousal at whatever point in the intercourse her fantasy finds exciting. She can even take as her point of arousal the attained satisfaction of her mate. Without defying the conventions dictating that sex be experienced more or less together, she can begin and end her pleasure according to a logic of fantasy and arousal that is totally unrelated to the functioning and representation of the "conventional" heterosexual sex act. Moreover, she can do so again. Immediately. And, we are told, again after that.

While the reader completes or continues this fantasy as desired, I would like to review how pleasure is defined and generated in Brooks's version of Freud's "Masterplot," a scheme that has no place for such "unruly" sexual dynamics as the ones I have just sketched. According to Brooks, Freud's discussion of the pleasure principle charts the route an organism takes when, stimulated out

of quiescence, it strives to regain equilibrium by finding the appropriate means of discharging the energy invested in it. According to this scheme, desire would be, even at its inception, a desire for the end; birth (the moment at which the organism begins to dispose of its energies) would be evaluated proleptically through the significance it acquires in the light of the death that consummates and totalizes the life history. And pleasure would involve the recognitions and reproductions of the dynamics "of ends in relation to beginnings and the forces that animate the middle in between" (Brooks, *Reading* 299). In short, the pleasure principle seeks to overcome birth, to attain the quiescence that preceded the organism's delivery onto the stage of life. We remember, for example, how Mary Shelley describes the coming to life of Frankenstein's Monster, the moment when a being composed of inanimate matter—assembled, significantly, from pieces of dead bodies—receives the dangerous spark of life: "I saw the dull yellow eyes of the creature open, it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs" (56). The *Master*plot of the novel would, according to the pleasure principle, be the chain of events that restores the creature to death while accounting for all the significances of its having come to life.

II

But just as *Frankenstein* does not get the Monster quite dead, it also seems not to account satisfactorily for all the significances that can be attributed to the creature's life. We need only to consider the kinds of major questions the novel raises to realize how successfully it avoids resolving any one of them.[2] This lack of resolution is often attributed to the young author's lack of skill, her inability, for all her imagination, to write a coherent plot (Rieger xxiv). And indeed, *Frankenstein*'s narrative dynamics are not at all well explained by analogy with the pleasure principle, although both the problem of this model and its underlying oedipal scenario might be regarded as among the novel's most important thematic concerns. In its mise-en-scène of the fantasy of the pleasure principle, *Frankenstein* dramatizes the monstrosity of the relation the Freudian scheme posits between beginnings and endings; the detours and repetitions that a Freudian narratology would associate with the bindings (and sublimations) of life energy toward appropriate resolution pose and repose a question that traditional narrative is not plotted to answer.

I have been arguing that male narratology conceptualizes narrative dynamics in terms of an experience it so swiftly and seamlessly generalizes that we tend to forget that it has its source in experience—in fact, in experience of the body. Although I have stressed male and female sexualities' different relations to representability, I of course do not think that textual production and narrative dynamics are matters of sexuality alone; nor do I mean to trivialize Brooks's work by emphasizing its dependence on a physiological model. Yet this demonstration enables us to speculate about how another set of experiences might yield another set of generalizations, another theory as vulnerable to the introduction of a counterexample as the Masterplot itself. I would like to explore what would happen if, having recognized the Masterplot's reliance on male morphology and male experience, we retained the general narrative pattern of tension and resolution ("tumescence and detumescence," "arousal and significant discharge") and simply substituted for the male experience an analogously representable female one. I do not propose the hypothetical model that follows as *the* alternative to what I have called male narratology—indeed, it does not even hold up as a model for all "female" narrative. Rather, I see it as *an* alternative that, however useful in explaining *Frankenstein* (and perhaps other texts), is ultimately more valuable for its relativizing function than as a scheme competing for authority with the Masterplot. The existence of two models implies to me the possibility of many more; neither the schemes I am criticizing nor the one I develop here exhausts the possibilities offered by the psychoanalytic model.[3] Work, class, law, politics, ambition, domination, power, and geography—issues that involve gender but not necessarily sexuality—represent compelling and theoretically productive motivations for narrative outside a psychoanalytic paradigm that sees them as dramatizations of sexual drives (see, e.g., Beer, *Darwin's Plots*; Chambers; Gates; Jameson; and D. A. Miller).

Any narrative model can be shown to privilege a particular explanatory paradigm and thereby a particular thematics. Yet if my model, based on uniquely female experience, is to represent only a shift in *thematic* emphasis, we will not be meeting the Masterplot on the terrain it has staked out for itself—that of form. We will have to return to an examination of how the distinction between form and theme is drawn. First, I want to explore the different narrative logic—and the very different possibilities of pleasure—that emerge when issues such as incipience, repetition, and closure are reconceived in terms of *an* experience (not *the* experience) of the female body.

Female experience does indeed include two highly representable instances of "tumescence and detumescence," of "arousal and significant discharge," whose very issue might suggest why they have been ignored in conceptualizations of narrative dynamics.[4] Both birth and breast feeding manifest dynamic patterns not unlike those described in the various orgastic sequences I cite above. Yet because they do not culminate in a quiescence that can bearably be conceptualized as a simulacrum of death, they neither need nor can confer on themselves the kind of retrospective significance attained by analogy with the pleasure principle. Indeed, as sense-making operations, both are radically *pro*spective, full of the incipience that the male model will see resolved in its images of detumescence and discharge. Their ends (in both senses of the word) are, quite literally, beginning itself. With this change of focus, the "middle" and its repetitions too must be conceptualized anew. Breast feeding involves much repetition without, I am told, all that much difference. Furthermore, it is stimulated by the demand of a very dependent other rather than by one's own desire. And its pleasure—which, I hear, is considerable—may well be why women keep doing it, but not why they are encouraged to.

Both breast feeding and birth involve the potentially—but not necessarily—satisfying presence of an other, and not simply the other who makes intercourse perhaps more gratifying than, but not essentially different from, masturbation. Now a woman whose mothering of this other was governed by an acute awareness of "ends in relation to beginnings" or, for that matter, beginnings in relation to ends would probably be both depressed and inefficient, whereas a man whose awareness of the logic of the pleasure principle inspired him to perfect his foreplay would be considered both a wise man and a good lover. We seem to have arrived at a crucial asymmetry in our analogy. While the male scheme fantasizes a scene of coupling, it then privileges a simultaneity of sensation and representability that is appropriate to one partner only (assuming, of course, that we are still talking about a heterosexual couple). In neither of the scenes of female experience in which a bodily part gets visibly larger and then smaller again can we fail to recognize that these changes are governed by the will, desire, and rhythms of another human being. The woman's will or desire may play a role in these processes, but it need not. A pregnancy may be willed (the result of reproductive lovemaking) or not (the result of rape or defective contraception); the onset of birth, too, is out of the mother's conscious control, unless one regards a representative of the medical profession and its chemical apparatus as an extension of her control; and a mother whose baby is asleep or sated is going to have trouble satisfying a desire to nurse it. Most important for our narratological purposes, however, both childbirth and breast feeding force us to think forward rather than backward; whatever finality birth possesses as a physical experience pales in comparison with the exciting, frightening sense of the beginning of a new life. (We should also not forget that birth is *painful*; its promise is so powerful that women often seem to forget what they have been through.)

Keeping in mind the possibility of some relation between female experiences of "tumescence and detumescence" and a narrative sense-making operation, we can now return to the narrative dynamics of *Frankenstein* and the particular quality of its irresolution. Critics have called attention to the thematics of birth in *Frankenstein*, noting poignantly that Shelley was pregnant, nursing a child, or mourning its death during the entire gestation of the novel.[5] Ellen Moers sees *Frankenstein* as "distinctly a *woman*'s mythmaking on the subject of birth precisely because its emphasis is not upon what precedes birth, not upon birth itself, but upon what follows birth: the trauma of the afterbirth" (93). She reminds us that Shelley's

experience as a mother was preceded by her experience as the daughter of a mother who died of poisoning when the placenta that had nourished the baby was not expelled and became septic. So Shelley's own experience of "beginnings in relation to ends" might itself be well described as the "trauma of the afterbirth."

Although Moers's analysis of the novel's focus on unsentimentalized motherhood is extraordinarily helpful, I am not sure I agree that Shelley set out to write a "horror story of maternity" (95). Moers overlooks that Frankenstein is a *male* mother; unlike the women in the novel, he is entirely unwilling to nurture the creature(s) dependent on him, although he all too readily sentimentalizes the creatures on whom he has been dependent. In other words, his indulgence in the retrospective mode of "male" sense making keeps him from acknowledging his ongoing responsibility to the birth he clones as well as from seeing that henceforth his plot inevitably involves the consequences of an act of creation that he regards as a triumph in and of itself. That creation would demand anything of him *beyond* the moment when scientific genius culminates the trajectory of its intellectual self-stimulation seems never to have occurred to him. Instead, in his fantasy of motherhood (which he calls fatherhood), he dwells exclusively on his own demands: "A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father [!] could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs" (53). The text suggests that Frankenstein has got things backward when, unlike a pregnant woman, he becomes increasingly pale and emaciated as his "creation" nears completion. And as if in anticipation of all the alienations his creature's alienation will cause him to share, he cuts himself off from friends and family for the duration of the project:

> I wished, as it were, to procrastinate all that related to my feelings of affection until the great object, which swallowed up every habit of my nature, should be completed. . . . [T]he energy of my purpose alone sustained me; my labours would soon end, and I believed that exercise and amusement would then drive away incipient disease; and I promised myself both of these when my creation should be complete.
>
> (54–55)

What Shelley's text makes appallingly clear is that the end of Frankenstein's "labours" effects a change in "all that related to [his] feelings of affection," if not in the feelings themselves. The postpartum nightmare in which "Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt" becomes "the corpse of my dead mother in my arms" is, of course, a neat foreshadowing of disasters to come, but it is also a parody of the kinds of retrospection Frankenstein has been promising himself as a reward for completing his act. The dream identifies Frankenstein with his mother and Elizabeth, so that the moment of retrospection fantasized by the pleasure principle becomes a nightmarish identification with the object of that fantasy. Frankenstein's completed feat, "read . . . in anticipation of the structuring power of those endings that will retrospectively give [it] the order and significance of plot" (Brooks, *Reading* 94), is thus part of the wrong story, because it represents a beginning instead of an end. The dream concludes with an image of labor (" . . . a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb convulsed . . .") and culminates in a vision of the Monster: "I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created" (57). The Monster's story not only emphasizes the disastrous consequences of confusing the accomplishment of fatherhood with the prospective relation of motherhood but involves them directly with issues of representability: it is the hideousness of his creation that triggers Frankenstein's abandonment of the Monster and leads to the series of brutal rejections that transform the creature's beautiful soul into a murderous one. The chain of monstrous acts that critics have had so much trouble accounting for within a traditional narratology seems to me to be about the inability of a male scheme to account for something it refuses to acknowledge. Shelley's use of the rhythms and dynamics of the experience of birth criticizes the culture's association of detumescence and "significant discharge" with ending and sense making. In its unrelenting insistence on the demands made by the figure whose existence turns the scientist's triumphant *consummatum est* into a new beginning, Shelley's narrative poses questions not accommodated in a *Master*plot and gestures toward an economy in which another con-

sideration of the relations among beginnings, middles, and ends would yield radically different results.

III

From the way that both Brooks and Scholes implicate the scenario of male pleasure in the processes that determine narrative sequence as well as the narrative's aesthetic, erotic, and ethical yield, it would seem that the pleasure of the text depends on the gratification of the reader's erotic investment. Once we recognize how a psychoanalytic dynamics of reading assumes the universality of the male response, we have little difficulty noticing how arbitrary the foundations of its universalizations are. To examine how these assumptions make their way into critical practice, I want to return to Brooks's "dynamic model" for narrative and to the distinctions his discussion implies between properties of narrative that are formal (and that continue to be matters of form even when Brooks calls for a narrative "dynamics") and those that remain merely thematic. He specifically takes issue with a

> feminist criticism that needs to show how the represented female psyche (particularly of course as created by women authors) refuses and problematizes the dominant concepts of male psychological doctrine. Feminist criticism has in fact largely contributed to a new variant of the psychoanalytic study of fictive characters, a variant one might label the "situational-thematic": studies of Oedipal triangles in fiction, their permutations and evolution, of the role of mothers and daughters, of situations of nurture and bonding, and so forth. It is work often full of interest, but nonetheless methodologically disquieting in its use of Freudian analytic tools in a wholly thematic way, as if the identification and labeling of human relations in a psychoanalytic vocabulary were the task of criticism. ("Idea" 335)[6]

I especially like the "so forth." What it indicates is the writer's sense of the inessentiality ("situationality") of the feminist critic's concerns; Brooks seems not to be able to imagine that the study of, for instance, mothers and daughters in fiction could generate anything as compellingly theoretical as the study of fathers and sons. And such issues do indeed remain irrelevant to a narrative model that speaks to and of male experience. But they are more than irrelevant to Brooks's system; they threaten it and its hegemony. Feminist scholarship has been particularly and systematically critical of traditional psychoanalysis and self-consciously uncomfortable when it invokes the Freudian apparatus. Moreover, having recognized the extent to which any theory remains blind to its own thematics, much feminist criticism strikes me as being far less thematic than Brooks's. In attending to other versions of the issues traditionally referred to as "man's place in the world," "man's narratives," "man's fate," and so on, feminist scholarship calls into question the authority of many of the assumptions that enable Brooks to write it off as he does.

It is, then, only in the context of the androcentric paradigm that Brooks's Freudian reading of the crisis of paternity articulated by male nineteenth-century novelists can be considered the model for all narrative—or even for all "traditional narrative." Yet this "situational-thematic" swiftly becomes a paradigm, and we are asked to regard it as an issue of form rather than of theme. It is easy to fall into the trap such a move represents, since traditional narrative and criticism generally assume the universality of the male paradigm. And it is correspondingly difficult to map a way out of this trap, since this effort requires paying attention to interpretational details that could easily be written off as "merely" thematic ("studies of Oedipal triangles in fiction, their permutations and evolution, of the role of mothers and daughters, of situations of nurture and bonding, and so forth"), as quibbles about a part rather than statements about the whole.

Nevertheless. In a passage reflecting on the plots of Stendhal's novels, Brooks sees what he considers the major issues of nineteenth-century narrative:

> It is a fault inherent to fatherhood that to act toward the son, even with the intent of aiding him in *la chasse au bonheur*, is inevitably to exercise an illegitimate (because *too* legitimate) control, to impose a model that claims authoritative (because authorial) status. All Stendhal's novels record the failure of authoritative paternity in his protagonists' lives, and at the same time demonstrate the narrator's attempt to retrieve the

> failure by being himself the perfect father, he who can maintain the conversation with his son.
> (*Reading* 76)

This is, indeed, a formidable agenda, and Brooks's use of this situational-thematic to illuminate what is going on in *Le rouge et le noir* is masterful. But his analysis proceeds at the expense of precisely the figures at whose expense Stendhal's novel—and Julien Sorel's plot—proceeds: the women. Hence, it reproduces, rather than acts critically on, the cultural assumptions encoded into the narrative form. Brooks comments, "[N]o longer interested in ambition, [Julien] judges his whole Parisian experience to have been an error; no longer interested in [the pregnant] Mathilde and his worldly marriage, he returns to the explicitly maternal embrace of Mme de Rênal" (*Reading* 86). This passage has an endnote, and when I turned to the back of the book, hoping for a statement of discomfort about this sense-making operation, I found instead a long authorization, complete with references to the fathers of psychoanalysis and structural anthropology, of Julien's enactment of the oedipal story: ". . . not only does Julien want Mme de Rênal to be mother to his unborn child, Mme de Rênal herself earlier expresses the wish that Julien were father to her children . . ." (337n25). By accepting such a hornet's nest as an issue of form instead of as a particular situation and a particular thematic, however powerfully they may govern what gets told in our culture, Brooks seems to vitiate rather than to enhance the power of his interpretation. If he claims for the novel the project of cultural criticism—of the nineteenth-century ideology of pleasure and its intersection with political institutions and narrative practices—then it would seem necessary to interrogate what becomes the uninterrogated ground of this vast cultural project, the woman's body and a particular myth of her pleasure and power that Brooks lays bare and then refuses to examine critically.[7] In the erotics of oedipal transmission, the woman is always a stage (in both senses of the word) for or in the working out of a problem of paternal interdiction, toward the moment of "significant discharge" when the son frees himself from the nets of paternal restriction and forges a self-creation—however ironized this process may be.

Like Scholes's homoaesthetic erotics of reading, then, Brooks's Masterplot occults the woman in such a way that the desire negotiated in the tug-of-war between men (here, fathers and sons) is played out, pleasured in, at her expense, without any acknowledgment of what her value outside this circuit of exchange might have been. *Le rouge et le noir*, *La peau de chagrin*, and *Nana* offer ample material for counterreadings, in which the text could be shown to be self-critically aware of the woman's presence as a function of its fantasy of the pleasure principle (Schor, *Breaking* and *Zola's Crowds*). Instead of undertaking such a counterreading, I would like to turn to a narrative of oedipal struggle written by a woman. George Eliot's *Romola* responds directly to such narratives as *Le rouge et le noir* and *Great Expectations* by setting its central interests (if you will, its situational-thematic) in self-conscious opposition to its form (that is, the oedipal ideology of the nineteenth-century narrative trajectory).

IV

When *Romola* appeared in 1863, it enjoyed considerable critical and popular success. In the course of the next century, however, it seems to have ceased to deliver reading pleasure, and if my students' responses are reliable indicators, the novel continues to baffle and annoy where Eliot's other works delight. Although a fascination with the Italian exotic might indeed have won readers in the 1860s, the novel's decline in popularity does not seem adequately explained by the density and heaviness that are Eliot's hallmarks. *Middlemarch*, for instance, has more pages and less action. Perhaps the modern resistance to *Romola* can best be understood as a measure of the novel's own resistance to its pleasure principle, for what Brooks would call its narrative desire and what the title indicates as its narrative interest turn out to occupy different and antagonistic trajectories.

Henry James called *Romola* "a kind of literary tortoise" ("*Deronda*" 976). The image is particularly nice, since it enables us to envision the plot as a living organism encumbered by a burden it seems not to have been constructed to bear. *Romola* begins with the entrance into Florence of its ostensible hero, Tito Melema, and its plot traces

his political rise and fall not only as a function of his ambition and desire but as a direct response to the oedipal challenge posed by his adoptive father, Baldassare Calvi. In other words, *Romola* is driven by precisely the dynamics Brooks describes in *Reading for the Plot*. But, I would contend, all its virtuoso plotting is but the tortoise without the shell. The burden that so oppresses the novel and some of its readers is the subject announced in the title. *Romola* is ultimately not about Tito Melema, or even about his counterpart in the novel's other oedipal plot, Savonarola, but about its eponymous heroine (for a discussion of the novel that complements mine, see Homans 189–222). The story of Romola is to some extent that of almost every George Eliot heroine: the struggle of an intelligent woman to live a life that does justice to her intelligence and to the vision it affords her. When Romola leaves Tito after his sale of her father's library, it is to seek out "the most learned woman in the world, Cassandra Fedele, at Venice, and ask her how an instructed woman could support herself in a lonely life there" (393). When she returns to Florence at Savonarola's behest, it is to follow his precept to "[l]ive for Florence—for [her] own people, whom God is preparing to bless the earth," to enter "that path of labour for the suffering and the hungry to which [she is] called as a daughter of Florence in these times of hard need" (438). Now Savonarola understands this duty to be primarily that of a wife, but Romola does not, and the interesting and difficult challenge she and the novel set for themselves is to find a vocation that follows the spirit of Savonarola's exhortation without succumbing to its letter.

It should not surprise us that the accomplishment of this challenge takes place outside Florence as well as (practically) outside narrative. As long as Romola remains in Florence, everything she does is presented by the narrative as determined by the logic of either Tito's or Savonarola's plot. The good deeds Romola performs when she joins Savonarola's followers, the Piagnoni, inevitably and repeatedly involve her with Baldassare as well as with Tito's other wife, Tessa, and we know that narrative "chance" has her encounter these particular representatives of Florentine society at large because of their—and her—importance (we might even say, despite themselves) to Tito's plot. That is, although her selfless, anonymous actions toward the befuddled, ailing old man and the charmingly vain and naive *contadina* are meant to demonstrate Romola's intention to subject her personal energies to the commonweal, what these events show us is the extent to which Romola, as the novel's protagonist, is subject to the exemplary oedipal plot even when she thinks she is generating a plot of her own. However much she might be out of Tito's thrall, she is precisely not free of his plot. Indeed, her story seems to be nothing but the record of the extent to which this is so. In our first glimpse of her as a Piagnone, we discover, as does she, that the half-dead man she revives with her wine is Baldassare. As a result, then, of the decision that breaks with and even defies Tito, Romola finds herself on the track of his oedipal secret. A subsequent incident functions in a similar manner: when, in an act of defiance expressing her uneasiness with the Piagnoni's anticarnival, Romola rescues Tessa from the zealots who would sacrifice the young woman's necklace to the "pyramid of vanities," the narrative immediately connects this act, through Baldassare's perception of it, to Tito's story. Again and again, Eliot's narrative checks Romola's will to a plot by subsuming her actions in the plot of her husband.

Yet Romola does have a story that is precisely *not* what the study of narrative would train us to regard as the story of *Romola*. Romola leaves Florence a second time, making her way to the Mediterranean coast, where she puts off to sea in a small sailboat. Instead of perishing, Romola awakens into a plot that rapidly acquires the force of legend—so rapidly, in fact, that it almost sacrifices its force as plot: she discovers a village decimated by plague, buries the dead, cares for the living, succumbs to exhaustion, recuperates in the care of the people she saved, and then decides she must return to Florence. The chapter has an oddly unspecific and dreamlike character that contrasts sharply with the novel's usual obsession with historical and local detail. This apparent departure from the historical novel is not, however, meant to be read as a dream; Eliot is careful to locate "Romola's Waking" in a specific history and, furthermore, in a specific history of persecution. The child whose crying "awakens" Romola from her reveries of "rest[ing] and resolv[ing] on nothing" (641) is a

Portuguese Jew whose family is in flight from the Inquisition. The story of how Romola rescues a village and introduces a Jewish child into the Christian community is by no means a respite from history; it registers the intersection of two historical trajectories, reminding us, perhaps, of all the untold stories generated but not accounted for by the official histories that do get told. At this obscure historical crossroads, the sequence that in relation to *Romola*'s Florentine plot could be summarized as "Romola went away and came back" acquires the force of legend:

> Every day the Padre and Jacopo and the small flock of surviving villagers paid their visit to this cottage to see the blessed Lady. . . . It was a sight they could none of them forget, a sight they all told of in their old age—how the sweet and sainted lady with her fair face, her golden hair, and her brown eyes that had a blessing in them, lay weary with her labours after she had been sent over the sea to help them in their extremity. . . .
>
> Many legends were afterwards told in that valley about the blessed Lady who came over the sea, but they were legends by which all who heard might know that in times gone by a woman had done beautiful loving deeds there, rescuing those who were ready to perish. (649)

By narrating the process through which a historical community takes possession of an event, Eliot enables us to feel both the force of legend and its difference from the force of plot.

The movement here from history to legend, from plot to what resembles a protostructuralist narrative scheme, plays an important hermeneutic role in Eliot's novelistic commentary on the oedipal plot. What is *Romola* if not a dramatization of the question of where to find for female experience the authoritative pattern that turns "mere inconsistency and formlessness" into a narrative of the effort to "shape . . . thought and deed in noble agreement" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 25)? And what is the Oedipus legend but Western culture's exemplary narrative model for this struggle? Every narrative, Eliot seems to be saying, needs a founding legend to lend provisional legitimacy to the accidents it records. Like Tito's, the male narrative has borrowed from the Oedipus legend for its readability; like Romola's, the female narrative remains in search of a comparably authoritative legend, the fiction of a "coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 25).[8]

Romola must and does provide its own legend, one that will govern and legitimate both our rereading of the novel and Romola's reading of her life. We should note, however, that the immediate transformation into legend of the episode in which Romola generates her own plot remains entirely ambivalent. She achieves legendary status in a community that is ignorant of her motivations for acting the way she does, to which she herself is essentially indifferent, and that is oblivious and irrelevant to the history in which we have been immersed for over five hundred pages: "Her work in this green valley was done, and the emotions that were disengaged from the people immediately around her rushed back into the old deep channels of use and affection. . . . Florence, and all her life there, had come back to her like hunger . . ." (650–52). Romola's appetite for her own future requires that she return to Florence and realize what she has rehearsed in legend. We should note, moreover, that the narrative presents the story of Romola's deeds and its assimilation into village lore before we read of her decision to return to Florence. Is there not something wrong with disappearing into the impersonality of legend in the course of the narrative of one's own life? The process in which Romola becomes first the "sweet and sainted lady" and then the "blessed lady"—a process that turns her back into the villagers' original misprision of her—ratifies her decision to return to Florence, to reenter a history in which she is still alive and flawed, rather than embalmed in the collective past perfect. In addition to motivating the continuation of the novel, Eliot's account of the genesis of legend makes an important point about the relations of the self to its history and of this history to a community. The narrative significance of a life history lies ultimately in the hands (ears, mouths, pens) of others; however we attempt to shape this tale according to our sense of its retrospective significance, its retelling is always beyond our control; like Frankenstein's Monster, the plot generated by the life history takes on a life of its own as soon as the protagonist dies or otherwise signs off.

What distinguishes legend from plot, then, is not simply its emphasis on the general over the particular but its use of the retrospective mode. Plot, at least in the discussions we have focused on here, sees a particular action in the light of what it *will have meant* at a future moment that it is simultaneously determining and resisting. Plot registers the extent to which the protagonist can, through any particular action or sequence of actions, take possession of the totality of a life yet unled. It is a mode, we might say, of individual proleptic retrospection. Legend tells a story that is over. Its significance has been established not by its protagonist but by the community whose retelling of the story has become the sole measure of the story's importance. The legend is the possession of a community to the extent that this community is possessed by a story that has, quite literally, outlived its protagonist. No longer the narrative of an individual's attempt at self-determination, the legend predetermines the way each individual in the narrative community will confer significance on the plot of his or her life. Legend, then, structures a community, thereby determining the future of its own reception.

Romola's (and Romola's) final gesture must be viewed in relation to Eliot's understanding that the narrative community needs new legends to rescue female experience from the margins of narrative and to render it intelligible in its own right. In the epilogue, when Tito and Tessa's son declares to Romola that he "would like to be something that would make [him] a great man, and very happy besides—something that would not hinder [him] from having a good deal of pleasure" (674), she replies first with an admonition to choose the common good over personal gains and then with an anecdote that has the dispassionate economy of legend:

> There was a man to whom I was very near, so that I could see a great deal of his life, who made almost every one fond of him, for he was young, and clever, and beautiful, and his manners to all were gentle and kind. I believe, when I first knew him, he never thought of anything cruel or base. But because he tried to slip away from everything that was unpleasant, and cared for nothing else so much as his own safety, he came at last to commit some of the basest deeds—such as make men infamous. He denied his father, and left him to misery; he betrayed every trust that was reposed in him, that he might keep himself safe and get rich and prosperous. Yet calamity overtook him. (675)

Romola chooses not to tell the version of her husband's life that *Romola* has just told; no doubt Eliot could have devised for her heroine another last word had she wanted Romola simply to warn Nello against a career like his father's. What does it mean that a woman with Romola's experience tells a young man growing up in an all-female household a version of the Oedipus legend that is hardly recognizable as such? The gesture shows us what sense Romola has made of the events in the novel we have just read, on what interpretation of the past she is basing her present and projecting a future. It suggests a reason beyond the sentimental for her adoption of Tito's family: the myths of Oedipus and Antigone, of Ariadne and Bacchus, have structured her life, but that life has been one of ignorance. These myths spoke so eloquently of her culture's plot for her life that she remained blind to the desires generated by her experience. But there is another way to tell the story, one that we, perhaps, are not ready (or have just been made ready) to hear. We are meant, I think, to mark the discrepancies between Eliot's narrative and Romola's; we are challenged to reread the novel in the light of the lesson Romola has learned and the way she has chosen to teach it. If we start, as Nello does, with a different legend (that is, the same story told a different way), will our communities of understanding generate different narratives? The other stories have already been written; we simply have to learn how to read them.[9]

V

If we set out to seek women's pleasure in the text, there seems to have been scant yield of pleasure in our pursuit. And, indeed, neither the readings I have criticized nor those I have proposed entertain female pleasure as a representable option, although the former would hold out, I suspect, for the possibility of an accident, never recounted, in which the woman's desire would coincide exactly with the desire of the male protagonist and his official surrogate, the male reader. The meanings

generated through the dynamic relations of beginnings, middles, and ends in traditional narrative and traditional narratology never seem to accrue directly to the account of the woman. At best, they point toward a rereading that evaluates the ideology of narrative dynamics according to whose desire they serve, rendering us suspicious of our complicity in what has presented itself to us as the pleasure of the text. We have been taught to read in drag and must begin to question seriously the determinants that govern the mechanics of our narratives, the notion of history as a sense-making operation, and the enormous investment the patriarchy has in maintaining them.

I would like to close with statements, roughly contemporaneous, from three figures central to our understanding of our culture and its narratives. Each was capable, despite his investment and powerful role in perpetuating the narratives of patriarchy from the nineteenth century into the twentieth, of glimpsing the utter arbitrariness of these constructs as well as the crucial role of gender in their formation and perpetuation. In 1900 Mrs. Everard Cotes sent Henry James a copy of her novel *His Honour and a Lady* and suggested that her writing was "like" his; in reply, James wrote:

> I think your drama lacks a little *line*—bony structure and palpable, as it were, tense cord—on which to string the pearls of detail. It's the frequent fault of women's work—and *I* like a rope (the rope of the direction *and march of the subject*, the action) pulled, like a taut cable between a steamer and tug, from beginning to end. [Your plot] lapses on a trifle too liquidly. (*Letters* 131)

Certainly this passage deserves any giggles it might provoke. But by underlining the "I" ("*I* like a rope") and admitting, a week later in another letter, that he "doubt[ed] if any man *ever* understands any woman's critical bias and method," James calls attention to the personal, ultimately arbitrary, and male bias of his own strictures (*Letters* 135). And a reading of his last novel, *The Golden Bowl*, could show how he addresses just this question of sexual difference by juxtaposing a man's "critical bias and method" with a woman's, offering us a glimpse of the kinds of pleasure narrative provides when the "pearls of detail" are strung differently—or not strung at all.

In *The Education of Henry Adams*, a text whose mythical investment in the figure of the virgin cannot be overstated, we read, "The study of history is useful to the historian by teaching him his ignorance of women; and the mass of this ignorance crushes one who is familiar enough with what are called historical sources to realize how few women have ever been known" (Adams 353). And even Freud, in a rare moment of total divestiture, when he acknowledges his own inability—and furthermore, his utter lack of desire—to "cure" a perfectly healthy lesbian, whose only problem it seems, is her father's violent opposition to her choice of object, is able to distance himself from the Masterplot so crucial to his—and his followers'—constructions of culture and its narratives. He writes:

> So long as we trace the development from its final outcome backwards, the chain of events appears continuous and we feel we have gained an insight which is completely satisfactory and even exhaustive. But if we proceed the reverse way, if we start from the premises inferred from the analysis and try to follow them up to the final result, then we no longer get the impression of an inevitable sequence of events which could not have been otherwise determined. We notice at once that there might have been another result, and that we might have been just as well able to understand and explain the latter. The synthesis is thus not so satisfactory as the analysis; in other words, from a knowledge of the premises we could not have foretold the nature of the result. (154–55)[10]

It is time to start again, to see what comes of unstringing the Masterplot that wants to have told us in advance where it is that we should take our pleasures and what must inevitably come of them.[11]

Notes

[1]This is the place to acknowledge Scholes's subsequent engagement with feminism; his "Reading like a Man" shows that he has paid careful attention to the feminist revolution in his field: "More than any other critical approach feminism has

forced us to see the folly of thinking about reading in terms of a transcendental subject: the ideal reader reading a text that is the same for all" (206). It is interesting to note the continuities in his practice: "reading like a man," he still prefers to articulate his (feminist) position in dialogue with a man (Jonathan Culler). This approach is certainly preferable to trashing female feminists. Yet a question remains: Does such a dialogue place the question of feminism in the "traditional position of women in patriarchy—the ultimately expendable item of exchange that merely gets the conversation going" (Boone 170), or can it be seen as a welcome response to Alice Jardine's suggestions that men "read women's writing—write on it and teach it . . . recognize [their] debts to feminism in writing . . . critique [their] male colleagues on the issue of feminism" (60–61)?

[2]George Levine, for instance, writes, "[T]he text announces clearly . . . the terms of our modern crises," and goes on to discuss the "seven elements of the Frankenstein metaphor": "Birth and Creation"; "The Overreacher"; "Rebellion and Moral Isolation"; "The Unjust Society"; "The Defects of Domesticity"; "The Double"; "Technology, Entropy, and the Monstrous" (3–16).

[3]Leo Bersani's work represents a compelling reading of Freud in relation to questions of narrative dynamics. Edward Said's language often resembles Brooks's, although Said examines "incipience" within a broader philosophical context. Among the numerous excellent book-length feminist studies of the nineteenth-century novel, Margaret Homans's and Marianne Hirsch's invoke a specifically feminist psychoanalysis that, whatever its debts to traditional psychoanalysis, focuses on other experiences and relations.

[4]I am grateful to Susan Stanford Friedman for calling my attention to these issues, which my own lack of experience made me overlook in earlier versions of this paper. Further thanks to Marilyn Fries, Carolyn Heilbrun, Marianne Hirsch, Heidi Kruger, and Elaine Winnett, who have lent the authority of their experience to my subsequent attempts to do justice to the subject.

[5]See Moers 90–99 and Rieger xi–xxiv. Johnson discusses *Frankenstein* as a narrative about maternity and female authorship.

[6]Earlier, in *Reading for the Plot*, Brooks had this to say: "The female plot is not unrelated to [male plots of ambition], but it takes a more complex stance toward ambition, the formation of an inner drive toward the assertion of selfhood in resistance to the overt and violating male plots of ambition, a counterdynamic which, from the prototype *Clarissa* to *Jane Eyre* and *To the Lighthouse*, is only superficially passive and in fact a reinterpretation of the vectors of plot" (39). Indeed. Brooks further describes the female plot as "a resistance and what we might call an 'endurance': a waiting (and suffering) until the woman's desire can be a permitted response to the expression of male desire" (*Reading* 330n3). See Hirsch, "Ideology," as well as Nancy K. Miller, *The Heroine's Text* and "Emphasis Added."

[7]If we take the time to look at her now, we discover that she is either "impervious to desire, a smooth surface on which desire cannot take hold" (Balzac's Foedora [Brooks, *Reading* 57]) or a being (Zola's Nana) whose "sexual organ, which is nothing, absence, becomes a tool more powerful than all phallic engines, capable of supreme leverage on the world" (Brooks, *Reading* 47).

[8]Eliot seems intent on emphasizing the inadequacy of the legends available for structuring women's lives and narratives. Like the "legends . . . told in that valley about the blessed Lady who came over the sea," the legend of Saint Theresa that begins *Middlemarch* is neither a successful enough précis of the forces impelling and driving women's lives nor a strong enough cultural force itself to guide Dorothea Brooke to a better understanding of her desires and to a more satisfying realization of the potential Eliot bestows on her.

[9]In "Beyond Determinism," Gillian Beer examines Eliot's narrative responses to the question "[C]an the female self be expressed through plot or must it be conceived in resistance to plot?" (117). Because of her interest in non-Freudian determinism, Beer passes over *Romola* ("After *Romola*, in which a succession of fathers and father-figures are killed and rejected, fathers are notably absent from [Eliot's] work" [129]) to focus on Gwendolyn's survival of "the business of sexual selection" (131), her acceptance of a "heterogeneity" of her own that calls into question the integrity of a Darwinian narrative model. I am not certain, however, that the killing or rejecting of fathers does away with the problem of oedipal determination in Eliot's later works; it is, after all, when she confronts the oedipal plot head on that Eliot can conclude a novel with her female protagonist actively involved in the narrative project.

[10]The German, "so kommt uns der Eindruck einer notwendigen und auf keine andere Weise zu bestimmenden Verkettung ganz abhanden" (276–77), expresses better than the English translation the notion both of the narrative "chain" and the threat of things getting "out of hand."

[11]I should like to thank Joe Boone, Peter Brooks, Rachel Brownstein, Carolyn Heilbrun, Marianne Hirsch, Jann Matlock, Nancy Miller, Julie Rivkin, Dan Selden, Catharine Stimpson, and Margaret Waller, whose careful readings of this article helped me see the many other "halves" of the argument.

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