The Unlikely Narrator:

Voice and Feminism in the Fiction of Rebecca West

by

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Abstract

In "Indissoluble Matrimony," The Return of the Soldier, and Harriet Hume, Rebecca West uses narrators who are overtly critical, to the point of being cruel, of the female characters. The female protagonists they observe are completely unlikable at first glance–either irritatingly weak and simple-minded or else dominating and interfering. An acknowledged feminist, West presents puzzling paradoxes about feminism in her fiction, a sharp contrast to her non-fiction, in which she clearly argues for the advancement of women around the world.

West uses these harsh, angry, and irrational narrators, often overlooked by feminist critics, in order to increase the strength of her female characters; not only do these women accomplish wonderful things, but they do so even under the critical observations of the narrators. By the end of each story, the female protagonists control much of the narrative, making the form of the story a feminist statement in itself. Each story is set as a war between man and woman, with the female protagonist triumphing in the end.

Although the narrators tend to criticize their home surroundings, these women run neat and comfortable households, even on extremely limited budgets. They cook, they clean, they sacrifice. They demonstrate their mastery of the domestic sphere while maintaining outside interests as well: as concert pianists, as a volunteer, as a Socialist lecturer. Even though the narrators wish to reduce these women to ultra-feminine housewives, the power of the women is displayed in a domestic setting.

Men are clearly to blame for the sterility of the couple. The narrators make it quite clear that men, either through contempt for sex, past misdeeds, or a drive for success greater than a drive for sex, are responsible for the childless state of the pairs. Women in these stories are given no choice concerning children; their reproductive control is determined by men as the narrators would like to retain control of the text.

The narrators attempt to demean their female subjects by discussing them in terms of animals, but the animal "transformations" that the women undergo actually give them even more power to cross boundaries. At the same time, the animal language accentuates the difference between men and women.

Finally, the women allow men to rest, although guilty consciences threaten to agitate the narrators forever. The women take control of the texts, but they are forgiving and nurturing, a sharp contrast to the earlier cruel narrators.

CONTENTS

Short Titles

"PF": Norton, Ann Victoria. "Paradoxical Feminism: The Novels of Rebecca West." Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1992.

HH: West, Rebecca. Harriet Hume: A London Fantasy. Garden City: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1929.

"IM": West, Rebecca. "Indissoluble Matrimony." Blast 1. Ed. Wyndham Lewis. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow, 1981.

RS: West, Rebecca. The Return of the Soldier. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 1980.

TR: West, Rebecca. The Thinking Reed. New York: Viking, 1936.

Introduction

I was introduced to the work of Rebecca West several years before I realized that she was an important English journalist, biographer, and novelist. When I was in high school, I had a T-shirt with a witty Rebecca West quote defining feminism: "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat...." I thought this was a very clever, if oversimplified, way of describing women's power. According to the quote, I was a feminist whenever I stood up for myself or controlled and told my own narrative. Years later, I learned that the ellipsis omitted "...or a prostitute."[1] Even after reading several stories by West, I failed to make a connection between the pink letters on the shirt and Dame Rebecca. During a family dinner, I discussed a West book that I had recently read for a class–and was reminded that I had encountered the author years earlier in an all cotton medium. How could I miss something so obvious?

I failed to recognize that the author of the quote and the Rebecca West to whom I recently had been reintroduced were one and the same because neither "Indissoluble Matrimony" (1912), The Return of the Soldier (1918), nor Harriet Hume (1929) features conspicuous feminist propaganda or even employs women-friendly storytellers. West uses narrators who are overly critical of the central female characters and in this way the form of the novel becomes a feminist statement in itself: in spite of the unreliable and contemptuous narrators who censor the actions of the women through their manner of

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1. Rebecca West, The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West 1911-17, ed. Jane Marcus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 219. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix "YR."

storytelling, female characters demonstrate their power throughout the stories almost without the narrator even seeming to notice, eventually culminating in a tremendous victory for the women as the narrators undergo radical changes at the end of each story. Although the narrators distort the portrayal of the women, the reader is reminded multiple times of the instability of the narrator as the narrator unconsciously incriminates him or herself with obviously flawed thinking. Jenny shifts alliances in The Return of the Soldier, being in love with both Chris and Margaret but also retaining her closeness to Kitty. At times, Jenny demonstrates powers of recollection too detailed to be true, but in other sections she is so vague and unclear about details that the reader must again question her credibility as a narrator. George in "Indissoluble Matrimony" and Arnold in Harriet Hume misinterpret the actions of Evadne and Harriet multiple times in instances where the true motives of the women are clear to the reader. The reader knows what George and Arnold think, sees them planning murder/suicides, realizes that these are sick men and not to be trusted. The manner in which the female characters succeed despite these unkind and unreasonable narrators suggests a hidden power: even though the women's stories are told by narrators who attempt to limit and distort, their strength is visible throughout the text, and the women possess a great deal of control over the conclusion of each tale.

Although West jokingly defined a feminist as a person who was not completely submissive, her writings seem to contradict themselves over the issue of feminism. In her non-fiction works, West is concerned with the social, political, and economic status of women, but her works of fiction portray women quite differently. On the surface of West's short stories and novels, her female characters tend to be either irritatingly weak

and simple-minded or else dominating and interfering, completely unlikable. As Ann Victoria Norton proposes in her 1992 dissertation "Paradoxical Feminism: The Novels of Rebecca West," West has been ignored by many feminist critics because although "West never adopted a misogynistic outlook or a stance against women's rights," her works suggest a "seeming belief in 'natural' gender roles that have been somehow violated and confused in modern times" ("PF" 8). Norton goes on to suggest that "West undermines her own feminism with this theme of the legitimacy of male supremacy" ("PF" 9). I argue, however, that this "male supremacy," demonstrated by the narrator, is annulled as female protagonists determine the conclusion of each story in spite of the narrator's censorship of the tale.

At first glance, West's women appear to be the antithesis of feminists; they form relationships with and then spend a considerable amount of time caring for their men, giving up much of their own lives in the process—a tendency which has not escaped the examination of many critics. A closer reading, however, reveals that these women are anything but powerless. In "Indissoluble Matrimony," The Return of the Soldier, and Harriet Hume, the female protagonists enjoy a power without boundaries; they almost magically read their beloveds' minds, metaphorically transform into animals, cross class barriers, and provide an environment conducive to sleep for their nervous men while managing efficient households, despite the criticism and the biases of the narrator. In these same stories, women are robbed of the choice of motherhood; infertility is the fault of the man, perhaps as a punishment for male involvement in war. As Patricia Stubbs writes about literature by women from the turn of the century, "[s]ex and reproduction are still inseparable," and yet the female protagonists in these three works by West are

sexually active but childless.[2] West herself linked marriage and motherhood, citing such a situation as an impediment towards careers such as writing because a woman is "[a]ccustomed to have in her hands the comfort of her husband and children" and is less likely to seek out less secure professions (YR 71). These stories attack the opinion that feminism is limited to social activism by revealing how women's power is displayed both in the home and in initially anti-woman narratives. Despite the best efforts of the narrators to describe the women as silly and flighty at times, cruel and self-centered at others, the power of these women emerges from the text as they alter the plot until they finally commandeer the story from the narrator.

Rebecca West, who was born in 1892 and died in 1983, was a self-proclaimed feminist since her youth. When West wrote "Indissoluble Matrimony" and The Return of the Soldier, she was a suffragette. Her interest in political and social equality for women did not cease when all British women aged 21 and over won the vote in 1928. A year after the vote for universal suffrage was passed, West published Harriet Hume, about which friend and biographer Victoria Glendinning wrote, "[a]ll through the 1920s she had been wanting to write a short non-fiction book about feminism. She never got round to it...and her feelings about the relations between the sexes worked their way into her fiction instead."[3] West wrote her ideologies into both her fiction and her non-fiction. "Indissoluble Matrimony," The Return of the Soldier, and Harriet Hume, therefore, cannot be read as mere entertainment but must be read also as an expression of feminism.

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2. Patricia Stubbs, Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920 (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1979), 123.
3. Victoria Glendinning, Rebecca West: A Life (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), 126.

In two of the works, however, West writes using a homicidal male narrator: George in "Indissoluble Matrimony" and Arnold in Harriet Hume. In The Return of the Soldier, the narrator is Jenny, cousin to the key character of the book, and a narrator whose emotions oscillate between love, sometimes even romantic, and hatred for the other characters. Why does West discuss feminism through male voices and the eyes of psychotic women? I argue that West uses these harsh, angry, and irrational narrators, often overlooked by feminist critics, in order to increase the strength of her female characters; not only do these women accomplish wonderful things, but they do so even under the critical observation of the storyteller and gradually usurp control of the narrative. As a result, West's books cannot simply be written off as feminist propaganda; West retains her appeal to a wide audience, not merely politically minded women of her time. At the same time, West's choice of narrators leaves the books open to anti-feminist interpretation. For instance, H. G. Wells praised Harriet Hume "because he approved what he saw as its theme of women's secondariness" ("PF" 143). Although the harsh, even cruel, narrative voice actually enhances rather than detracts from the power of women in West's works, the complete novel must be studied—both plot and form—to realize fully the strength of Harriet. Plot and narrative structure combine in "Indissoluble Matrimony," The Return of the Soldier, and Harriet Hume to create a display of female power.

Although the narrator in The Return of the Soldier is a woman, I include this novel in my thesis because the setting of war creates a sharp contrast between men and women, their desires and their strengths, and because the narrator demonstrates many of the same tendencies towards unreliability and biased behavior that the male characters

display in the other two works. In this novel, Chris Baldry has shell shock from the Great War. He forgets the last ten years of his life, including his wife Kitty and their estate, and writes to Margaret, his sweetheart in youth, from the army hospital. Chris's cousin Jenny lives with Chris and Kitty, and Jenny narrates the story, although throughout the novel, she shifts alliances between Chris, Kitty, and Margaret. In the end, the three women realize that only Margaret can cure Chris's amnesia by showing him the toys of his dead son, and Jenny sadly notes that Margaret must do this, even though it means that Chris will have to return to the front and face death in the trenches once again. Critics have had mixed reactions over the appropriateness of calling The Return of the Soldier a war story. Motley F. Deakin writes that "The Return of the Soldier does not give us any authentic sense of what war is about....For West the war was a negative force that seems to be evoked simply to cause Chris's loss of memory."[4] Other critics, however, argue that West's first novel is an important war story. Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig write, "[i]t suits the author's purpose to concentrate the effects of war in one significant casualty: Chris." Bonnie Kime Scott also defends the status of the novel: "The Return of the Soldier...qualifies as war literature, but it is set on a feminized home front."[5] I include this novel in my thesis because of the emphasis on women's lives in war—an actual war, rather than the battle between women and men, but still a conflict resulting from men in the trenches and women at home, at odds with each other's desires and plans. This novel's narrator is unstable, shifting alliances from one character to another, being certain of the tiniest detail at some moments while being unclear and hazy at

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4. Motley F. Deakin, Rebecca West (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 132.

others, and ultimately concluding with a possible death, all within the context of male ambition and female desires being at odds with each other.

In "Indissoluble Matrimony," Evadne Silverton is a Socialist lecturer, much to the distaste of her husband George. George is driven by terrible thoughts of marriage and becomes obsessed with the idea that Evadne is being unfaithful to him. When George discovers that Evadne is practicing a lecture one night even though he has forbid her to speak at the Socialist meeting, the couple quarrels and Evadne leaves for a quick swim to calm her. George thinks that Evadne is going to the house of an attractive bachelor neighbor and mentally plans their divorce and fantasizes about destroying Evadne's reputation. When he sees that she is alone at the swimming hole, he can't tolerate the thought of not divorcing her and so decides to kill her instead. They struggle, and George believes that he has killed his wife and is a free man, if only until the authorities come to arrest him. By the time George returns to the house, however, Evadne is already in bed. A stronger swimmer than George, she merely ducked under water and swam away. George again tries to murder Evadne—and himself—by closing the windows and turning on the gas, but Evadne, being a thrifty housewife, turned off the gas at the main before she went to bed. Realizing that he is beaten, George goes to bed, where Evadne snuggles up to him even in her sleep. This story explores West's fascination with opposites: man and woman, human and animal, white and black, violence and peace. George narrates this story, and like Jenny in The Return of the Soldier, he sees some details clearly but misinterprets many others at the expense of his wife. George never convinces the reader

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5. Bonnie Kime Scott, The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 563. Hereafter cited in the text.

to believe in his wife's offenses, but the reader is aware of her virtue and strength.

Harriet Hume was West's favorite among her own novels, and in many ways it is a later retelling of "Indissoluble Matrimony" with more autobiographical elements. West again explores opposites—feminine and masculine, garden and city, private and public—with the voice of a homicidal male narrator. Harriet and Arnold are lovers when one day Harriet magically acquires the ability to read Arnold's mind. She sees that although Arnold loves her, he wants a more socially and politically profitable marriage. The two separate and continue to rise in their careers, Harriet as a concert pianist and Arnold as a politician. Harriet and Arnold meet every couple of years, and with each visit, Arnold is more maddened by Harriet's ability to read minds. Just as George incorrectly sees Evadne's absences as signs of an affair, so does Arnold see Harriet's clairvoyance as the source of his impending political downfall and certain ruin. Arnold thinks that by killing Harriet, he will end the opposition and the conflict that has driven him mad. After aimlessly roaming the city one night, Arnold attempts a murder/suicide, but as Harriet can see his thoughts, she has policemen waiting. When Arnold is apprehended, the spell is broken: Arnold regains his sanity, Harriet loses her gift to read his thoughts, her garden blooms, and the two have "A Very Happy Eternity" (HH 275). The conclusion to this novel has caused critics to wonder if this is really a "happy" ending after all. As Ann Victoria Norton notes, "Arnold gives up a bad life for a good afterlife; Harriet loses her satisfying and meaningful existence as a musician for an eternity of 'housewifery'" ("PF" 142). Evidence from elsewhere in the text, however, reveals that Harriet maintains her happy lifestyle.

Much as the quotation on my shirt lacked "...or a prostitute," feminist critics

selectively ignore "unfeminist" moments in the works of modernist feminist authors and frequently overlook the masculine perspective of the narrator who describes West's female characters in the harshest of terms. Where non-feminist critics focus on the later, more conservative works by West, feminist critics tend to concentrate on the earlier, more radical articles and stories. Modernist and feminist scholar Bonnie Kime Scott was once criticized for trying overly hard to make Woolf, West, and Barnes good, supportive women by excusing the "overly-'masculine' tone among her three women."[6] As one scholar observes of West's Black Lamb and Grey Falcon, West "claims the traditionally masculine power to judge and define."[7] West's sweeping statements and judgments are often troubling because she writes using narrators who think as the stereotypical domineering male might—judging and defining from their point of view without taking into account outside considerations. Nevertheless, when critics ignore the male narrators and their harsh treatment of women in West's works, they miss commenting on an even greater display of female power. Not only do many women in West novels and stories do great things, but they accomplish their fantastic feats under the unfriendly eyes of non-feminist narrators and eventually gain control of the narrative, as demonstrated by the transformations that the narrators undergo at the end of each of these stories. West's powerful women act in a setting that many of her readers understand: a society in which men revel in obvious displays of power but where women remain strong and have hidden control over the situation.

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6. Rebecca Stott, "Refiguring Modernism: Book Review." Feminist Review 58 (Spring 1998): 141.
7. Janet Montefiore, Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History (New York: Routledge, 1996), 211. Hereafter cited in the text.

Different than a Doormat:

The Happy Home

Although the women in these stories manage the households, they are keepers of the hearth rather than doormats—a difficult distinction to make for the narrators. The women tend to the households in such a way as to impress the narrator even when the narrator is being critical of their work. West once quipped, "[t]here is, of course, no reason for the existence of the male sex except that one sometimes needs help with moving the piano," and men in West's fiction are primarily absent from any sort of household obligations (quoted in Glendinning 236). In "Indissoluble Matrimony," when George returns home from work, he irritatedly notices the table setting and thinks, "[a]s usual she had been in an improvident hurry: it was carelessly done" ("IM" 98). Evadne holds a position as a popular political lecturer, but George ranks setting the table ahead of delivering a talk. His "faithful attendant of his hearth" irritates him with her outside interests in the Socialist party and with her supper selection for the evening ("IM" 109, 102). Much to George's disgust, Evadne's mealtime masterpiece consists of:

> a bowl of plums, softly red, soaked with the sun, glowing
> like jewels in the downward stream of the incandescent
> light. Besides them was a great yellow melon, its sleek
> sides fluted with rich growth, and a honeycomb glistening
> on a willow-pattern dish. The only sensible food to be seen
> was a plate of tongue laid at his place. ("IM" 99)

Although George criticizes his wife's selection of dinner foods as "an absurd supper to

set before a hungry solicitor's clerk," he is still impressed by the aesthetics of the ambrosial fruits before him ("IM" 99). The language in which George describes the food is lovely, almost poetic, a jarring contrast to the table setting which he earlier called "carelessly done," creating a sense of distrust of his narration from the very beginning of the story. He criticizes the table fare yet speaks of it beautifully; he is inconstant in his judgement. Evadne's meal preparation is so skilled that she can draw indirect praise from the narrator merely in the manner in which he describes the meal. Perhaps even more striking than the sexy meal which Evadne prepares is the meat near his own plate. The same hands which carefully caressed polished plums and a sumptuous melon and gleaming honeycomb also handled a potentially repulsive cut of meat. Evadne's pleasure from "crushing honey on new bread, or stripping a plum of its purple skin" suggests that fruit and honey would be a sufficient meal for her, but she includes a coarser dish for the benefit of her husband ("IM" 99). Ironically, George is pleased with her inclusion of tongue in the meal, but he despises Evadne's job as a speaker, another use of tongue. Perhaps George would be happier if his wife focused her artistry on domestic chores instead of lecturing, but Evadne proves that she can both cook and speak without one interfering with the other and gives her husband a substitute tongue of sorts when she will not give him hers.

When the kettle boils over, George, knife in hand, calls Evadne an "idiot" ("IM" 104). For West, idiot is an important word for women. In the prologue to Black Lamb and Grey Falcon, West writes,

> the word "idiot" comes from a Greek root meaning private person. Idiocy is the female defect: intent on their private

> lives, women follow their fate through a darkness deep as that cast by malformed cells in the brain. It is no worse than the male defect, which is lunacy: they are so obsessed by public affairs that they see the world as by moonlight, which shows the outlines of every object but not the details indicative of their nature.[8]

West's description of the difference between the sexes is behind both George's inability to discern details as well as his view of Evadne. George is full of misconceptions about his wife. When he looks at his wife, he sees "the fantastic figure that made him feel as though they were not properly married" ("IM" 99). George is incapable of viewing Evadne as his legal, true wife. He sees Evadne's interest in sex as the sign of a whore, mistakes the run-through of speech for a song, thinks she is going to a lover instead of the swimming hole. He sees his wife as an idiot, a person suited only for private life, home life, but at the same time, he is unable to see her real talents or even her real motives. He desires an idiot wife, one who focuses all of her energy on the household and denies herself displays of personal interest and sexuality. Janet Montefiore writes, "West's opposition 'lunatic-idiot' does, with whatever qualifications, remain useful for its insistence that human experience is a continuum which can be distorted by two kinds of tunnel vision: seeing only personal details, or only impersonal generalities" (190). Through the eyes of the narrator, we see that Evadne is no idiot, but George proves that he himself is a lunatic. George attempts to kill Evadne in the moonlight that night

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8. Rebecca West, Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey through Yugoslavia (New York: Penguin, 1969), 3. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix "BL."

because he interprets her absences and preoccupations as infidelities; he sees the outline of her habits but fails to comprehend the details correctly, as when he misinterprets Evadne's destination as the house of a young bachelor neighbor rather than the swimming hole. Although West's narrator calls the heroine an "idiot," a desire that Evadne turn out to be less than she is.

Around the time that George realizes that he is beaten, he starts to lose some of his control over the text. Evadne has the "thrifty habit of turning off the gas at the main to prevent leakage when she went to bed" ("IM" 117). Although Evadne has foiled George's second murder attempt of the night, he is grudgingly complimentary in acknowledging her "thrifty habit." In addition to the narrator's language in describing the events, the events themselves are also significant, demonstrating that as the female characters exert more influence over the narration of the novel, they also wield more power over the outcome of events. When George tries to kill the two of them with the gas, he fails because Evadne remembers to turn off the gas that night, even though just minutes before she and George had fought viciously. At this point, George realizes that he has lost, and he goes to bed. Because Evadne has followed household routine that day, just like any good little idiot wife, while still displaying her personal talents—swimming, lecturing, and cooking—George is soundly beaten. The idiot wife he desires is impossible to kill because the idiot wife will always remember to turn off the

gas at night, so devoted is she to her domestic duties.[9] The non-idiot wife is just as impossible to kill; her physical strength and quick mind making her too strong for her weaker husband. Although George narrates the events of the evening in such a manner as to make his wife seem careless yet cunning, Evadne's domestic supervision, morality, and vigor are clear. George has control over the narration for most of the story, but Evadne is clearly the stronger of the two. George cannot overwhelm her with brute strength when they wrestle in the water nor can he beat her when she is fast asleep, and he concedes that he will crawl into bed with her "every night until he died" ("IM" 117). George relinquishes his plans of murder and recognizes that he will spend every night in Evadne's arms, just as she wishes.

Part of the unreliability of Jenny's narration stems from her desire to align herself with Kitty. When Jenny brushes out Kitty's hair while the two women discuss Chris's absence, Jenny thinks, "I tried to build about me such a little globe of ease as always ensphered her, and thought of all that remained good in our lives though Chris had gone" (RS 15). In addition to being envious of Kitty's calm, Jenny also attempts to create a fantasy world around her, one of serenity and contentment. Although Jenny later comments that Kitty's "decorative genius" filled the house with beautiful objects and lovely gardens, Jenny links herself to Kitty and claims a part in the tradition of the

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9. In "The Salt of the Earth" from The Harsh Voice, the wife narrates, but the reader is aware of her many offenses and can foresee her murder, although Alice herself is incapable of doing so. So interfering is Alice that when her husband Jimmy says, "No husband ever was haunted more steadily by the presence of his absent wife," Alice interprets this as a sign of his affection rather than a wry comment indicating the intensity of Jimmy's irritation with Alice (183). Jimmy succeeds in killing Alice that night because she is an idiot wife, and her constant fussiness leads to a fight with the cook and allows her to be easily poisoned by her husband.

keeping the estate beautiful (RS 117, 15). Jenny criticizes Kitty's knowledge of botany. Kitty has "a snappishly competent conversation about the year's vegetables with Pipe the gardener" where she "[says] many such horticulturally scandalous things as 'I know Queen Mary's prolific, but she isn't sweet'" (RS 48). Jenny states that Kitty's conversation is "snappishly competent," indicating that Kitty's remarks, though correct, are also a little contemptuous, ungracious, curt. Although her competency in discussing plants with a professional gardener proves that Kitty is well-learned in both the science of botany and the aesthetics of the plants, Jenny views her as being somewhat bothersome in her interventions with the gardener's duties. As narrator, Jenny passes judgement on Kitty but cannot ignore the fact that Kitty does indeed know her plants. Jenny wants to be like Kitty when it comes to "womanly" activities such as tending the house and garden, but Jenny shies away from Kitty's confrontational display of knowledge.

Kitty has concerns outside the house as well as in it, despite Jenny's attempts to make Kitty appear self-absorbed. For instance, Jenny says that Kitty "looked so like a girl on a magazine cover that one expected to find a large '7d.' somewhere attached to her person," complimenting her beauty but at the same time reducing her to someone whose job is to sit still and look pretty all of the time (RS 11).When Chris notices a pile of flannel, apparently out of place in the elegant drawing room, Kitty replies that the cloth provides "[c]lothes for one of the cottagers. We–we've a lot of responsibilities, you and I. With all the land you've bought there's ever so many people to look after ...." (RS 62). When a woman of lower class arrives, Kitty says, "I'm seeing her because she may need something, and I specially want to be kind to people while Chris is away" (RS 23). Evadne and Kitty both manage households, but they do it with grace and talent, and they

maintain concerns outside their homes as well despite the narrators' tendency to reduce them to mere housewives.

In Harriet Hume, the narrator, Arnold, projects some of his own feelings of poverty-driven insecurity onto the title character. Harriet lives in poverty while Arnold resides in a mansion, yet Harriet owns the more comfortable house by far. In fact, many of West's heroines—Harriet and Margaret in The Return of the Solider included—are poor. Alexandra Pringle writes in the introduction of the Virago edition of The Harsh Voice that West believed that "[p]overty and goodness are one."[10] Arnold's crazed desire for wealth and prestige motivates him throughout the novel, causing him to blame Harriet for her success and his own failures. Early on when Harriet first reveals her ability to read Arnold's mind, he thinks,

> He disliked above all things women who laid claim to occult gifts. It was halfway to saying they believed in reincarnation and, when the wind blew from the south, themselves remembered having been Egyptian princesses in their time—ay! and having kept their own pyramid, too. (HH 3)

Although Arnold Condorex professes to hate women who pretend to possess "occult gifts," Harriet Hume is not pretending. She does indeed have the ability to read Condorex's mind, and she tells him his thoughts. Harriet never pretends to see more than she can nor does she purport to be anything other than herself; she is not an ancient

princess nor a high priestess. Condorex actually demonstrates some degree of self-loathing in this passage. After all, it is Arnold, not Harriet, who attempts to create a magical world of power and prestige for himself. While Harriet is content with her piano and her simple life, Arnold constantly struggles to construct a world in which he is far above his original–and self admittedly, low–station in life. A drive for self-improvement and class mobility is acceptable and even honorable, but Condorex's ambitions exceed a healthy amount of initiative. He loses honor and self-worth as he marries a woman out of love of her family name rather than love of the woman herself; he practices his rhetoric so as to be able to sway crowds with his words rather than with the truth; he deceives the members of his own party which helped raise him to their level. Arnold incriminates himself in the story; the reader sees his thoughts and knows that he is a fraud.

Arnold Condorex's mansion is no less fanciful than the "pyramid" of a modern reincarnated princess: both are built on illusions. Condorex's home and expensive furnishings are purchased on credit. His political career is built on lies. His stupid but important wife goes to lavish parties without him. Nothing is as it seems. Condorex appears to be sane to his constituents, but in his own narration, the reader sees that this is not so. He sees mythical women adorned in flowering boas descending his staircase and rows of his servants in his hall at night. His most important illusion is that Harriet is to blame for all of his financial woes and his inevitable political collapse.

When Arnold realizes that Harriet has been successful for her talent, not through deception as he has, he makes a point of reducing Harriet to a woman made for the

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10. Quoted in Maroula Joannou, 'Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows': Women's Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change 1918-38 (Oxford: Berg,

pleasure and comfort of man. When Harriet leaves to make tea, Arnold noses about her living room, noticing that "with the sole exception of that superb monster, the piano, the little things in her house were all so much better than the big" (HH 8-9). Perhaps Harriet should have saved her money and purchased comfortable furnishing rather than the huge and expensive piano in the center of the room. Harriet returns with the tea, and Arnold observes that she opens two jars of preserves, even though she had early lamented that jellies lose their flavor soon after being opened. He looks at Harriet and

> reflected that her little head, which was almost egg-like in its oval blandness, was as full as an egg is of meat with the desire to please. But for that his shrewdness rebuked him. There must be much else besides. She had mastered the shining black leviathan that just behind her proclaimed Bechstein its parent. Like him she had crawled up the dark tunnel which leads from obscurity to the light, and had performed the feat more expeditiously. (HH 18)

At first, Arnold sees Harriet as a creature whose only desire is to please him, but then he resents Harriet's progression from unknown musician to a well-known pianist, an irritating realization for the man who "thought more of his advancement than of her or any other woman in the world" (HH 65). Arnold replaces romantic relationships with political success, and Harriet's success is troublesome to him because she has gained fame while maintaining her ability to nurture.

When Arnold is baffled by Harriet, he resorts to telling Harriet what proper

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1995), 150.

women do. When the two meet again several years later, Arnold tells Harriet, "It makes your offense much greater, Harriet, that you are a pretty woman. A man very intensely dislikes to have his faults pointed out by a pretty woman. Such things should be done by the thick-ankled aunts of the world..." (HH 188-9). Arnold treats Harriet as if it were a crime that she realized his failings. For him, Harriet's faux pas is intensified by the fact that she is beautiful and should be there for the viewing pleasure of men, not for criticizing their flaws. Harriet, shortly after Arnold has been apprehended for attempting to kill her, demonstrates perfect hospitality to Arnold and the police. When she retreats into the house, Arnold calls in, "Were you never taught that since you are a woman it is your duty to please men and that men hate to be kept waiting?" (HH 271). While ridiculing Harriet's habit of keeping her gowns warm in the kitchen, Arnold remarks, "You are as you would not dare to go to church shameless hussy that you are. Modest women, I believe, manage so that they are never thus" (HH 272). Although Harriet is modest and practical, Arnold rebukes her again and again on the grounds that she is not his perfect woman.

Arnold's madness is clear to the reader. Arnold hates his life, hates his wife and his mansion and his position. When he first becomes mad, he rants to his image in a mirror, "Why should you not have had the luck of other men and have a beautiful wife who was no idiot, or have been unhappily married on terms so free from obligation that infidelity was not a mean welshing?" (HH 216). Although Arnold hates Harriet at this point of the novel, the reader remains aware that Harriet is no idiot , that Arnold is actually wishing for a wife like Harriet even while he obsesses over killing her. Arnold is well aware that his wife "the Lady Ginevra was by no means as gifted in her intellects as

in her person," and he blames Harriet for his present misfortune: "For he would long ago have married a plain woman with family behind her, and so forfeited his freedom to approach Ginevra, had it not been [for Harriet's mind reading]" (HH 97, 101). Arnold accuses Harriet for his failure and his descent into madness, and Harriet is strong enough to take this abuse without ever believing that she is at fault. In this way, Harriet is similar to another West character, Isabelle from The Thinking Reed, willing to make almost any sort of sacrifice, even giving up a relationship with a lover or husband, if it means saving the partner from destruction. Isabelle, seeing her husband about to make a huge mistake, thinks, "[i]f Marc could have been distracted at this moment by the body of another woman, she would have made their bed with her own hands" (TR 302). She would give up her husband and even prepare his bed as if she were a maid if it meant saving him. Even when Isabelle contemplates leaving Marc, she does all that she can to protect him, even having all photographs of her sent away for reframing so that he would be used to their absence when she was still there and so that enemies would not jeer at her "as yet another American heiress who had forced her way into a French home and had proved unable to maintain its standards of decorum" (TR 372). Although Arnold blames Harriet for his unhappy home life, Harriet herself has a pleasant home–and gives every indication of being able to share this happy place with Arnold, if he makes the correct decisions.

Or a Prostitute:

Sexuality and Fertility

Unless the work is an autobiographical account of West's childhood, couples rarely have children in fiction by Rebecca West. In part, the childless couple motif echoes West's own wishes, as does masculine control of fertility. In her affair with H. G. Wells, Wells was the partner responsible for birth control. Biographer Carl Rollyson notes, "As the more experienced lover, H. G. put the blame on himself. He had been using no birth control devices, relying only on withdrawal. At the critical moment he had 'slipped' and lost control."[11] Even in personal experience, West sees men as having control over whether or not a woman becomes a mother. Rollyson also writes, "[a] mother's domestic life was the last thing she wanted" (53). West's estranged relationship with her illegitimate son Anthony proves that it was with good reason that West hoped to postpone motherhood for many years. A Wells scholar notes,

> Rebecca tended to blame Anthony for interrupting her literary career at a crucial stage in its development and for being the cause of many of her disagreements with Wells. Anthony tended to hold her responsible for much that had gone wrong in his own life, for his emotional insecurity and ignorance of many aspects of his father.[12]

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11. Carl Rollyson, Rebecca West: A Life (New York: Scribner, 1996), 53. Hereafter cited in the text.
12. J. R. Hammond, H. G. Wells and Rebecca West (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 226. Hereafter cited in the text.

West was on her way to becoming a popular literary figure when Anthony was born, and the birth of her son interrupted her writing. In addition to forcing her to move out of London and away from the gossip—and away from the newspapers and periodicals which had been running her work—the birth of their son marked the beginning of many arguments with Wells concerning the care of their child as well as the dynamics of their relationship. Before her pregnancy, West had written numerous articles concerning the manner in which unwed mothers and their illegitimate children were ostracized and humiliated, and West found it difficult and tiring to obey her married lover's wish that she retire from public life for the duration of her pregnancy (Rollyson 54). Rather than echo her own painful experience with motherhood in her fiction, West tends to eliminate parenthood from her fiction.

Neither Evadne, Kitty, Margaret, nor Harriet have a living child after lengthy relationships; women are more than mere child-bearers, and the impact of the father in conceiving and sustaining children is realized in the three stories. In the same year that "Indissoluble Matrimony" was published, West also wrote a brutal literary review for The Freewoman on the works of several woman authors. She writes, "It would be hard to say why women have refused to become great writers. Undoubtedly marriage eats like a cancer into the artistic development of women" (YR 71). Clearly West was not an advocate of marriage in her early years, yet Margaret, Kitty, and Evadne are all married women and Harriet is sealed to Arnold for all eternity at the end of her novel. Fertility issues are often associated with women, but in these three stories, the men are responsible for the lack of children and through the narration demonstrate peculiar attitudes towards sex. Because at the point in time in which West wrote, sex was often automatically

paired with reproduction, the sexuality of the men in these three stories cannot be isolated from their sterility.

The sexuality of the men in these stories seeks to control the fertility of women. George is perhaps the most obvious in his psychotic views on sex. When George recounts his courtship with Evadne, he remembers that she was "ripe for adult things," such as "her unashamed kisses" which lead "to extravagant embraces" ("IM" 101). From the very beginning of their relationship, George thinks that Evadne is too sexual. Even after their marriage when sex is sanctioned by most moral institutions, George accuses his faithful wife of an excess of sexuality:

> "You've always been keen on kissing and making love, haven't you, my precious? At first you startled me, you did! I didn't know women were like that." From that morass he suddenly stepped on to a high peak of terror. Amazed to find himself sincere, he cried—"I don't believe good women are!" ("IM" 103)

George holds fast to the idea that good girls do not enjoy sex, only prostitutes delight in having sex. Because Evadne does enjoy sex, he reasons that she must be the street woman that he had already accused her of being.[13] George finds Evadne's open sexuality both disturbing and disgusting. While eating dinner, George notices his wife's "strong breasts," which remind him that "something about the fantastic figure...made him feel as

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13. Interestingly, George later threatens, "I'll turn you out into the streets—" ("IM" 104), as if he were intent on making her a prostitute. As in the quotation from my T-shirt, Evadne is neither doormat nor prostitute, and although George already knows that Evadne is not a doormat, he finds it incomprehensible that she is not a prostitute either.

though they were not properly married" ("IM" 99). "Fantastic" implies that his wife's body is somehow magical, mysterious, ill-suited for a domestic partnership and also echoes his own fantasy of his wife's affairs. Evadne, comfortable with sex, wishes, "We're a couple of dull dogs, aren't we? I wish we had children" ("IM" 101). Evadne does not require children to have a fulfilling life, but she admits to wanting them just the same. While Evadne would like children, George revels in their barrenness:

> Quite often George had found a mean pleasure in the thought that by never giving Evadne a child he had cheated her out of one form of experience, and now he paid the price for this unnatural pride of sterility. For now the spiritual offspring of their intercourse came to birth. A sublime loathing was between them. ("IM" 110)

George states that he is to blame for the couple's childlessness, and he relishes their barrenness so much that he has the "unnatural pride of sterility." Fertility is a weapon for George, and he denies Evadne the opportunity to give birth to a child as he himself gives birth to an intense hatred. Not only is the option of motherhood stolen from Evadne, but George also usurps the act of giving birth.

George's one strength is denying his wife motherhood; he cannot control Evadne's activities nor can he make himself feel clean. George sees his wife, like all women, as "useless, save for childbirth, with no strong brain to make her physical weakness a light accident, abjectly and corruptingly afraid of man. A squaw, she dared not strike her lord" ("IM" 111). Women are child-bearing vessels to George—and weak ones at that. Because of his aversion to sex, he denies her pregnancy, making her

completely useless according to his rationale, although the reader has already witnessed Evadne's skill in managing a household and her fame in delivering political lectures. Strength is a key issue for George. Even after he thinks that he has succeeded in killing Evadne, he repeats, "I must be a very strong man," as if he needs affirmation of his strength (HH 113). Sex does not make him feel manly; supposedly murdering his wife does. When George realizes that he did not kill Evadne down by the lake, he admits, "[b]odies like his do not kill bodies like hers" (HH 117). His sterility, which he sees as a sign of strength on his part, may be related to his sense of physical inferiority. Although George believes that his wife's only value is attached to her ability to bear children, he denies her this act, and yet his wife is far from useless. If Evadne were completely useless, then George would lack the violent urge to destroy her. George even admits that Evadne is indispensable as he muses,

> The thought of intimacy with some lovely, desirable and necessary wife turned him sick as he sat at his lunch. The secret obscenity of women!....He wondered why the Church did not provide a service for the absolution of men after marriage. Wife desertion seemed to him a beautiful turn of the tainted body to cleanliness. ("IM" 100)[14]

His wife is both "desirable and necessary," making her far from useless even though she

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14. In her biography Saint Augustine, Rebecca West writes, "Widows who had taken vows of celibacy were granted special privileges by the church, as if they were being rewarded for a triumph over the turbulent quality of maleness" (49). George seeks, in a sense, the masculine version of this, thus placing him in a realm equal to that of the abhorrent Monnica, whom Rebecca West treats harshly.

bears no children. In George's own words, "[h]e saw his wife as the curtain of flesh between him and celibacy, and solitude and all those delicate abstentions from life which his soul desired" ("IM" 112). George's primary complaint against women seems to be that sex makes him feel dirty. During the opening dinner scene, George disgustedly remarks, "I can't sit down to supper without washing my hands!" ("IM" 99). George's aversion to all things "tainted" is responsible for the Silverton's childless state; Evadne's role in child bearing is never questioned. George criticizes Evadne's voluptuous body and sensual acts, and he enjoys depriving her of children.

In Harriet Hume, Arnold also sees sex as something that cannot be openly enjoyed and scorns the idea of raising children. As Ann Victoria Norton writes, "[f]rom the book's first page he views sex as a punishable act, something mysterious and secret to be hidden from unseen spies" ("PF" 138-9). The novel begins with Harriet and Arnold leaving Harriet's bedroom one afternoon, whispering "as if they feared to awaken sleepers" (HH 1). When they come to a window on the landing, Arnold "swagger[s] back into the daylight, challenging it to punish one for having been where one had been. So he cried aloud: 'See, Kensington goes on! It has been waiting for us all the time! It has been threatening us!'" (HH 1). Arnold confronts the bustling town as if it were an intimidating chaperone denouncing their lovemaking, and Norton writes that a little later "Arnold changes the afternoon's imagined menace from the undefined penalty for enjoying extramarital sex to the specific dullness of married life" ("PF" 139). Harriet's first act of mind reading occurs when Arnold, upon seeing a couple escorting their children on a walk, ominously predicts, "It is threatening us that some day we will spend Saturday afternoons not at all as we do now, that instead we will go and take tea with

Grandmamma so that she can see our little—" (HH 2). Harriet stops Arnold before he can say the names of the children in his pessimistic vision of their future, but Arnold already has stated his position on parenthood: children disrupt the pleasant lives of otherwise happy adults. Arnold's first reaction to Harriet's hand over his lips is to wonder, "[w]as she going, after all that had happened, to be delicate about what hardly any women were delicate about nowadays?" (HH 2-3).

Although Arnold possesses a deep physical attraction to Harriet—an attraction which finds realization in their romantic afternoon in Harriet's bedroom—he has no desire to use that attraction for procreation. In fact, his desire for success manifests itself in "a spasm of desire as urgent as any he had ever felt for a woman" (HH 54). When Arnold and Harriet have a falling out, Arnold thinks that Harriet is treating him unfairly, that only he of all men realizes that

> she could not be the product of the tame human womb, but must have been begotten by a god in a wind-tossed grove, and then again so primly perfect that she could not be the product of the crude human womb, but must have been worked by the finicking human hand, like fine needlework or old silver. (HH 49)

In Arnold's eyes, the uterus is a tame and crude womb; Gods and master artisans are necessary for truly perfect creation.[15] Later in the novel, Arnold restates his disdain for the uterus. When again confronted with Harriet's magical power, Arnold thinks, "the

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15. In British Writers of the Thirties, Valentine Cunningham writes that George Orwell and other writers viewed the womb as a room, sometimes as a cage or tomb (100).

darkness round him became as absolute as if it were the womb, the grave" (HH 157). Rather than viewing the womb as the source of human life, Arnold sees the uterus as the center place of confusion and obfuscation. His contempt for women is so great that "[h]e tittered scornfully at...all women and felt more of a man. His mind ran in its groove again" (HH 208). In order for Arnold to be fully functional and sufficiently manly, he needs to ridicule women. Through Arnold's own description of his emotions and his account of the events, West makes it quite clear that Arnold is weak and crazed while Harriet is strong and healthy.

When Arnold's pending political failure and financial ruin overwhelm him and he decides to kill Harriet, whom he blames for all of his troubles, he wonders,

> Did ever bridegroom go to his wedding chamber with so intense an emotion as fills my breast now?....Nay, why should he? For what he is about to do he has probably done before and will certainly do a thousand times after. But my occupation is unique. Since, having but one self, I can have but one opposite, I can never again have the pleasure of destroying it. And what profit I shall derive from it! After to-night all tides shall flow my way. (HH 249)

Arnold uses a wedding night metaphor to describe his intended action with Harriet. Sex is replaced with violence, love with anger. Rather than a couple beginning their life together, Arnold intends to end Harriet's life. Arnold perverts a sexual experience by thinking in terms of revenge and murder, demonstrating his opposition to sex and

essentially reproduction.

Arnold is always interested in having control of the tides. For Arnold, everything is a matter of "negotiation," but the tides know no human intervention. Even concerning his political career, he confesses, "It is strange that this fundamental stuff of politics has never interested me. 'Tis the negotiation that has ever charmed me, and the struggle for eminence" (HH 133). When he contemplates killing Harriet, his justification for murder is that "[a]fter to-night all tides shall flow my way." Earlier in the novel when he runs into Harriet on the street on the hottest day of the year and invites her to his home for refreshment, Arnold remarks:

> I thought I could see the tide of the heat rocking against these walls. I begin to think there is more in that than an image, for I feel as if I were a great stone on the bed of some flood, and you a lovely water plant that grows near by. When the tide flows so, it is well, for that inclines your fair frondage to flow close by me; but while the tide goes t'other way, your frondage flows far away from me. Indeed, if that tide flowed much more strongly, I think it would wash you from your place, and you would go sailing away, and I should never see you any more! It is a great pity, my sweet, when I love you so! Tell me, can I do nothing to set back this most unfavourable tide? (HH 137)

Tides, flowering plants, water–all of these are traditional images of female fertility, yet Arnold wishes to control this tide. Arnold lives by negotiation, and being unable to

influence the tides with his voice, as he has won over thousands of people with his smooth lies about Mondh, frustrates him. At the same time, he does have some control over his relationship with Harriet. Although he fears the strong tide which might wash the floral Harriet away from him, Arnold's actions, his betrayals, his political marriage, his lie—these are the true things which threaten to push Harriet away from him forever. Hammond writes, "Harriet represents the softer, feminine aspects of the human temperament: whimsicality, intuition, mystery, romance. Condorex stands for all that is male and domineering: calculation, ruthlessness, logicality, drive" (168). The book is filled with opposites, with Arnold becoming convinced that Harriet can read his mind because they are opposite, and Harriet "need but look in her own mind, record what she sees, imagine its opposite, and she has all of me" (HH 201). The contrast between the two is set up early in the book, when Arnold asks Harriet, "are you love? Are you truth? You are not justice, though you might be mercy. Are you poetry? Or are you philosophy?" And Harriet responds simply, "Write me down as all that Arnold Condorex rejected" (HH 85). Arnold desires to control everything, opposites and all.

In The Return of the Solder, the history of the father contains some element which causes the child to die. Chris, not Kitty, is responsible for their childlessness. When Margaret learns that Chris and Kitty's son died at the same age and at the same time as her own baby, she stutters, "It's–it's as if they each had half a life ...." (RS 160). Because of his relationship with Margaret so many years ago, the Baldry's infant son must die as does the Grey baby. Jenny also realizes the connection between the Greys' child and the Baldry's child. "For although I knew I would have accepted it with rapture," Jenny thinks, "because it was the result of intimacy with Chris, its awfulness

appalled me" (RS 161). When the doctor talks to Kitty, Margaret, and Jenny about Chris' amnesia, he theorizes, "[Chris] turned, then, to sex with a peculiar need," a statement which Margaret confirms: "Yes, he was always very dependent" (RS 167). This dependency is what caused Margaret and Chris's falling out in the first place. When they were young, Chris saw Margaret laughing with an old friend and became very jealous and angry. Margaret remembers, "And he went on talking and then it struck me he wasn't trusting me as he would trust a girl of his own class..." (RS 107). Chris's "peculiar need for sex" was an issue of control; he was dependent on Margaret and could not stand to share her with anyone else. Ann Victoria Norton points out, "[t]he happiest night Chris remembers took place in a small Greek temple the Duke built for his trysts with prostitutes" ("PF" 30). Chris is sexually attracted to Margaret in part because she is poor and he can exhibit some control over her, as the Duke did with his whore long ago.

Likewise, in The Thinking Reed, a child dies because of the part of the father. Marc Sallafranque, an industrial leader, is forbidden to gamble due to a government contract following the war. In his past exploits in Monte Carlo, Marc lost large sums of money, making him a joke among his peers and an antagonist to his workers and the French government. Isabelle, in an attempt to save her husband from public humiliation and financial ruin, chooses to make a scene, although her fit is dangerous to "her unhappy child" (TR 308). Isabelle knows that "she must never try to convince Marc that she had deliberately decided to make the scene in the baccara-room in order to stop him gambling, and that the loss of her child had been, not the cause of that decision, but its consequence" (TR 313). Because Marc has a history of losing large sums of money at the casino, because Chris left his true love when he could not dominate her entire life,

their children must die. The narrator clearly views the death of the Baldry and Sallafranque children as results of the sins of their fathers, and Jenny's recollection of Chris and Margaret's love affair on Monkey Island reveals that sex is an issue of control for Chris.

In addition to West's unhappy experience with parenthood, her thoughts concerning war and child rearing make childless couples the only possibility for her stories and novels written in the years surrounding the world wars. West blames men for war and holds men responsible for failing to create a safe domestic sphere for the young. As Vera Brittain wrote in Lady into Woman, "[m]odern war struck more fiercely than ever before at those things which meant life to the majority of women—children, homes, education, healing."[16] George despises the act of sex, Arnold refuses to father a child, Chris and Marc create situations in which their children cannot live. While traveling in Yugoslavia, Rebecca West recognized the connection between war deaths and parenthood. After observing a war monument depicting Serbian peasant women—presumably the mothers of the Serbian boys killed, West writes,

> I became filled with feminist rage....Since men are liberated from the toil of childbirth and child-rearing, they might reasonably be expected to provide an environment which would give children the possibility to survive and test the potentialities of humanity. The degree of failure to realize that expectation revealed in this disgusting little room could

> not be matched by women unless ninety per cent of all births were miscarriages. (BL 488)

According to West, because men frustrate the efforts of women to maintain a safe homeland for children, they do not deserve to enjoy the experience of parenthood. In comparing miscarriage rates to causality rates in war, West returns to her theme of war in marriage, where the women do all they can to provide a pleasant home environment while their men attempt to check their efforts by eliminating parenthood. West's narrators discuss fertility in terms of male offenses, much as West saw child birth and rearing in real life. The language of West's narrators indicates how men deny their female partners children through their unhealthy views on sexuality.

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16. Quoted in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Letters from the Front, vol. 3 of No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 223.

The Acts of Animals

The narrators use a great deal of feline language to describe the women in these stories, thereby suggesting to the reader that women are not hampered by the differences between genders or races any more than their power is restricted to belonging to a certain species, although the narrators often treat these animal transformations negatively and see the women as being dumb or dirty or wild. In "'Autumn': The Fate of the Drudge," an article written for The Clarion in 1913 and later reprinted in The Young Rebecca, West writes,

> Now, I should not mind being some sort of animal. I should love to be a cat and lie in a basket by the fire all day and go on the tiles at night. And the life of a tiger seems attractive; even in captivity. It must be great fun to escape from a menagerie and liven up a rural district. But the animal life that the Eugenics Society orders women to lead is not nearly so amusing as that. If a woman's husband is rich she must lead the cloying life of a prize pedigree pig. And if she is poor she must live the life of a pit pony in a district uninspected by the RSPCA. (170)

West commonly thinks of animals in reference to people. She herself would like to be a contented cat, lounging by the fire. In many ways, she is the tiger, stirring up the townspeople with her words rather than her claws and fangs. Throughout their lengthy relationship, West and Wells called each other Panther and Jaguar respectively. West

uses animal imagery in her fiction because it was a part of her life and to emphasize the differences between men and women and the lack of limitations placed on her female protagonists.

Evadne is a lioness through much of "Indissoluble Matrimony," particularly when the differences between the white husband and his mixed-race wife are emphasized. When George enters their house and finds his wife playing with her thick black hair, he describes her stroking motions "as a cat licks its fur," a revolting yet appropriate image for a man obsessed with hygiene ("IM" 98). During their initial meeting when Evadne sings, "her great black eyes lay on him with the innocent shamelessness of a young animal … " ("IM" 100). George cannot understand singing for the mere enjoyment any more than he can comprehend his own attraction towards someone with "black blood." When George and Evadne quarrel, George notes that Evadne "looked black and dangerous. She trod softly like a cat with her head down" ("IM" 104). When the Silvertons fight, their differences are emphasized; Evadne becomes black and cat-like while George remains white and human. During a later fight, Evadne walks "towards him as a cat approaches a displeased master" ("IM" 109). Although there is no direct mention of race in this feline reference, cats rarely go to their masters on command, and the "displeased master" connotes a slave owner. When George glimpses his wife's body in the moonlight, he notes, "[s]he was clad in a black bathing dress, and her arms and legs and the broad streak of flesh laid bare by a rent down the back shone brilliantly white, so that she seemed like a grotesquely patterned wild animal as she ran down to the lake" ("IM" 107-8). The black and white animal races towards the watering hole is a zebra, an animal native to Africa, much like the gazelle earlier. When George thinks about his

supposedly dead wife, he wonders "why she had so often looked like the cat about to steal the cream. What was the cream? And did she ever steal it?" ("IM" 113). George is utterly incapable of understanding Evadne; he does not know why he associates certain images with her nor what the images mean, and he is unable to complete his impression of his cat-like wife–he only knows that it cannot be good.

George and Evadne are not the only pair from the early 1900s who fail to communicate because of animal-like qualities. Of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her cocker spaniel Flush, Virginia Woolf writes, "The fact was that they could not communicate with words, and it was a fact that led undoubtedly to much misunderstanding. Yet did it not lead also to a peculiar intimacy?"[17] George and Evadne share this bizarre union as well. George does not listen to Evadne, does not hear her speeches, does not hear her explanations of her absences, does not hear her claims of fidelity. At the same time, their lives are intertwined to such a degree that George feels he must kill Evadne in order to be free, yet they remain married and sleep in the same bed where Evadne caresses him even in her sleep. In David Garnett's 1923 novel Lady into Fox, Mr. Tebrick's young bride inexplicably transforms into a fox one day. Although his wife is a vixen, Mr. Tebrick attempts to keep her human for as long as he can. Once the vixen has horrified her husband by killing and eating a pet bird, the narrator comments, "[w]e know her husband was always trying to bring her back to be a woman, or at any rate to get her to act like one, may she not have been hoping to get him to be like a beast himself or to act like one?"[18] George is always attempting to turn Evadne into the idiot

17. Virginia Woolf, Flush: A Biography (London: Hogarth Press, 1933), 38.
18. David Garnett, Lady into Fox (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923), 41.

wife which he so desires, but perhaps Evadne is trying equally hard to free George from his boring, mundane life with interesting meals and stimulating conversation, even arguments. Although George narrates the tale in such a way that any traits his wife shares with an animal are negative, other contemporary literature depicts animal behavior in humans as a complex and exciting event. When West's narrators despise animal similarities, they magnify the awesome although strange and complicated ability of the women to take on other powers.

Like Evadne, and even Rebecca West herself, Kitty and Jenny are catlike in The Return of the Soldier. Kitty's very name, although diminutive, indicates early on that her power extends beyond the realm of the human. In equipping the nursery with her "decorative genius," Kitty selects a large number of animal ornaments:

> along the mantelpiece, under the loved print of the snarling tiger, in attitudes that were at once angular and relaxed–as though they were ready for play at their master's pleasure but found it hard to keep from drowsing in this warm weather–sat the Teddy Bear and the chimpanzee and the woolly white dog and the black cat with the eyes that roll. (RS 10-11)

Above the fireplace where one might expect to find a portrait of one or both parents is a picture of a fierce tiger. Stuffed animals are arranged on the mantel, but the only toy even slightly animated is a cat. Kitty enjoys the sunshine of the nursery while drying her hair much as the stuffed animals appear to delight in the warmth. Although animal prints and stuffed animals are appropriate decor for a young child's room, a snarling tiger

print–let alone a much adored picture of the large angry cat–and an unluckily colored cat with moving eyes seem a bit out of place. Kitty, who identifies with felines in part because of her name and in part because she moves between people much as a cat might–sometimes ferociously, sometimes quietly, always watching–stocks the nursery with felines in prominent places as if she is marking the territory, attempting to reclaim the son that her husband caused to die.

In addition to connecting cat-like attributes with Kitty, Jenny also shifts species, but whereas with Kitty the feline imagery shows her limitless possibilities, in Jenny it demonstrates a desire to be what she is not, leading to a clash of opposites. At one point Jenny wishes,

> I could send my mind creeping from room to room like a purring cat, rubbing itself against all the brittle beautiful things that we had either recovered from antiquity or dug up from the obscure pits of modern craftsmanship, basking in the colour that glowed from all our solemnly chosen fabrics with such pure intensity that it seemed to shed warmth like sunshine. (RS 15-16)

Much as Jenny acts as the graceful go-between for Kitty and Margaret and Chris, so does she become an equally sleek cat reveling in her beautiful surroundings. Although she previously allied herself with Kitty in caring for the estate, Jenny also wants to be free from responsibility, a pampered guest with free roam of the house. Even Jenny's sexuality shifts. Although Jenny feels incredible affection towards Kitty, she kisses Margaret "not as women, but as lovers do," a sharp contrast to the dysfunctional

heterosexual partnerships in the other stories (RS 184). Due to her parents' unhappy marriage and her own troubling relationships with men, West often centers her work around ill-fated couples. Of The Harsh Voice, West confessed that it was written "in the depths of gloomy contemplation of the destinies of the inarticulate damned", the inarticulate damned, for West, being unhappily married people, a theme which she would cover more fully a year later in The Thinking Reed (quoted in Hammond 218-19). Similarly, Laura in West's spy novel The Birds Fall Down wonders, "Are other people's parents happy together? They all pretend to be, of course. But is it true?" (4). Female/male relationships rarely work out in West's stories and novels, and West uses the human/animal relationship to demonstrate the differences in women and men are just as astonishing.[19]

Although the matronly heroine in The Return of the Soldier, Margaret is described in unflattering or pitiable terms, depending on Jenny's disposition to her at the time, but she still remains a strong woman and a much favored character to many readers. Margaret herself is initially described as possessing "the wholesome endearing heaviness of the draught-ox or the big trusted dog," not a particularly admirable description (RS 25). When ordered to hand over a letter, Margaret "scurrie[s] to the open door like a pelted dog" (RS 36). Margaret is from a lower class, and Jenny registers this not only in viewing her as an ox but also as an ill-treated and unfortunate dog. Margaret has strength that Jenny and Kitty lack; only she can truly hold Chris's affection through the years,

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19. Rebecca West once confessed, "If I were young again, I would deliberately (and against my nature) choose to be a lesbian" (quoted in Glendinning 125). Her friend and biographer Victoria Glendinning wrote, "[t]he point of the novel [Sunflower] was to be

only she can bear to jar Chris back into the reality which may lead to his death.

Harriet Hume is also replete with animal transformations which reflect Arnold's tendency to reduce her to a feeble-witted woman little better than an animal. Throughout the novel, Harriet "mews" and "purrs," "squeaks" and "bleats." Arnold, too, turns to animal metaphors to display his contempt for Harriet's powers. In regards to his own wife, Arnold imagines her "dancing at the Embassy, limp in the limp arms of one of her own kind, like two anchovies side by side in a bottle," an unflattering image to say the least (HH 167). Arnold sees Harriet, not as a dangerous big cat as George views Evadne, but as a tame, stupid pet. "It would be very agreeable," Arnold thinks at one point, "were women to perform their ablutions in the manner of cats" (HH 127). George also notices that his wife looked at times as if she were a cat licking herself clean. Both men are intent on turning the private moments of the women into animal ones. Arnold attempts to degrade Harriet by describing her as a lamb, a kitten, a mouse, because, as critic Bonnie Kime Scott writes,

> Harriet positions herself in the stereotypically masculine domain of culture, as performer, critic, and owner. She does this, however, without relinquishing what is usually placed in opposition to masculine culture. She in no way gives up woman's traditional association with nature. But hers is a creative and active relation.[20]

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that great men...spelled death to a woman's sexual and domestic happiness and personal autonomy" (275).

20. Bonnie Kime Scott, Refiguring Modernism, vol. 2, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995), 141.

Harriet's involvement with nature is great; she is the tides, she transforms into animals, she makes spring come before its time. One day, when Arnold trails Harriet through a park before approaching her for conversation, he sees an Irish Wolfhound sliding on a patch of ice and Harriet grabbing his collar and pulling him back to the normal ground. Then, Harriet "bowed her head to whisper to his pale and pompous eyes in his own language that not for one instant had he lost his dignity; and he snuffled in her hand to compliment her on her perfect accent" (HH 74). She talks to the dog before she talks to Arnold! Harriet mews like a cat, bleats like a lamb, and she also talks to a dog as if it were one of her own species. There are no boundaries for Harriet, not in class nor gender nor species. In West's novel Sunflower, the title character and an autobiographical sketch of West herself involved with Wells and Beaverbrook, wishes "that a magician would change her into a cat, so that she could come and live in this house without the question of love being raised" (145). Not only do the narrators view female characters as women, but West leaves open the option of women wanting to transform into animals as well as a holiday from the struggles of their relationships, despite the narrator's attempts to turn them into beasts.

Giving Sleep, Taking Control

As the narrator realizes that the women take on the power of animals at times, so does women's power transcends consciousness. Sleep is a victory for the women in these stories, a point where the narrator loses control of the story and the woman takes over. In these texts, women have the unique position of giving embraces and rest. Evadne "thriftily" does both. George crawls into bed, and "[s]till sleeping, Evadne caresse[s] him with warm arms" ("IM" 117). Evadne sleeps in the bed in which George hoped to die; she gives him sleep instead of death. "He was beaten," the text simply reads ("IM" 117). Although much of the story featured George's obsessions with his wife's fidelity and his plans to destroy her, when he finds Evadne asleep in their bed he concedes and resigns himself to a lifetime with his wife. Evadne's victory is apparent in the manner in which they sleep. He gets into bed where she holds him. Even while sleeping, Evadne remains strong: "Out of mere innocent sleep her sensuality was distilling a most drunken pleasure" ("IM" 116). Her caresses are particularly powerful in light of the fact that only minutes earlier when George thinks he has succeeded in killing Evadne, he exclaims, "I wouldn't touch her with the tongs" ("IM" 113). Even when Evadne sleeps while George is awake, she remains the more mighty of the two. Evadne represents female power that is strong even in an unconscious state.

Jenny in The Return of the Soldier removes sentimentality from caresses but celebrates sleep as well. "Embraces do not matter," she claims, "they merely indicate the will to love and may as well be followed by defeat as victory" (RS 140). Hugging while conscious is seen as something of a battle, but awesome power resides in the nurturing,

tender act of holding one's sleeping beloved. Anyone can embrace while awake, but sleeping embraces mean something great, a special type of gift that only very strong women possess in stories and novels by West. Jenny notes that peaceful rest indicates

> that the woman has gathered the soul of the man into her soul and is keeping it warm in love and peace so that his body can rest quiet for a little time. That is a great thing for a woman to do. I know there are things at least as great for those women whose independent spirits can ride fearlessly and with interest outside the home park of their personal relationships, but independence is not the occupation of most of us. What we desire is greatness such as this which had given sleep to the beloved. (RS 144)

Rather than belittling the act of a women holding her sleeping man, Jenny calls the act of embracing a slumbering man "a great thing." There are women who prove their strength through their independence in the outside world, but there are also women who demonstrate their power as they tend to the sleeping form of a loved one. Neither the independent woman nor the guardian of sleep is more powerful; women have different manners in which they may demonstrate their feminine strength. Jenny does not possess this ability to give Chris rest and comfort, although she is in love with him, and she envies Margaret's position. Margaret does things for Chris which no one else can, despite the narrator's desire to fulfill Chris's life at Baldry Court. Although Jenny's unreliability as a narrator have been made clear, she cannot alter the story so that she is Chris's heroine.

Arnold seeks out Harriet because he thinks that he can end his torment by murdering her, but really Harriet concludes his anguish by giving sleep and taking control of the situation. In Harriet Hume, Arnold is restless when he realizes that he faces political ruin and has lost control over all aspects of his life. He sleeps only under the influence of alcohol, spends the night mad and raving, wandering around the streets of London, looking for an omen, thinking of killing Harriet and then himself. Arnold's anxiety is so great that he hallucinates in his own house. Only Harriet can soothe him, give him the peace through sleep which he seeks. Once Harriet works her magic again, Arnold says that he is "Calm, and very comfortably tired! I can tell you that by the time we have had supper and talked our fill, I will be ready enough to fall into bed" (HH 273). When Harriet affirms that he will be able to do just that, Arnold yawns joyfully: "Ay, we shall sleep, and sleep, and sleep" (HH 273). Although the conclusion of Harriet Hume has been criticized as Harriet's sacrifice for Arnold, one should recall earlier in the novel, after having sex in Harriet's room, Arnold sighs, "Oh, I am tired," but Harriet says "And I am hungry!" (HH 6). Harriet does not rush off to find Arnold a pillow but rather scurries off to the kitchen to satisfy her own desire above Arnold's discomfort. He has not yet undergone the transformation in which he will release control of both Harriet and the text (HH 6). Earlier in the story, when Arnold and Harriet meet in the park after not having seen each other for many years and Arnold apologizes for deserting Harriet, she tells him a story in which she pretends that she is a china shepherdess on a hearth which people think is neglected but really is quite content. Arnold fails to understand what Harriet is trying to say and asks, "What are you trying to tell me, you little jade?" She answers,

> "I am trying to tell you, my dove," she said, bracing herself to it, "that although I had been transported out of my soul by your endearing attributes, I had never destroyed my address book. Its pages," she remarked in an offhand manner, "were not blank. [....] "You had hardly been gone more than two hours before I had spoken by telephone with a young man and given him permission to call on the following day and instruct me concerning the Polish Corridor, since some amiability of mine had inadvertently made him believe me profoundly interested in that subject...." (HH 89)

Harriet kept her little black book even when she was involved with Arnold! Her life was not empty without him, although he imagined it to be, and her life will not be empty with him either. Harriet retains her interest both with and without Arnold's presence. When Arnold loses control of his life, he loses control of his mind. Harriet steps in and commands both, giving him much needed sleep and a foreseeable future that does not end in destruction. Women in West texts hold great power in their ability to instill rest in their beloveds; they give the rare gift of worry-free rest to their men while usurping the power of the narrative in an unthreatening manner.

Conclusion

Rebecca West started off a 1912 literary review for The Freewoman with: "The worst of being a feminist is that one has no evidence," yet West gives evidence of female power through both plot and form in "Indissoluble Matrimony," The Return of the Soldier, and Harriet Hume (YR 70). Merely because feminists are different from doormats does not mean that they must stay far away from the welcome mat on the front stoop of their homes; feminism is as applicable in a domestic setting as it is at a political meeting, perhaps even more so as women in these novels are found at home rather than at a rally. Rebecca West discusses feminism in subtle terms, thereby making the power of women applicable to an audience much wider than just the circle of politically aware and active readers at the time. West's wives are talented homemakers, but they have interests which lie outside the home as well—Harriet's piano and friends, Evadne's politics and late night swims, Kitty's singing and social work for the poverty-stricken in the area. Just as the affairs of these women take them outside of the home, so does animal-like diction permit them to cross the boundaries of gender and race or class. Fertility is not the responsibility solely of the women, and war is not an issue just for men. Women also have the power of acting as a guardian in and of sleep; the strength of women transcends consciousness. Rebecca West confronts the assertion that feminists are political activists by describing the power of women even within the home.

These women are powerful, and their strength is enhanced by West's use of critical narrators to recount their tales. Because West filters her feminism through these unlikely narrators, the power of these women stands out as being all the more spectacular.

Their actions demonstrate their power as does their eventual control of the text. Even though the narrators criticize and insult the female protagonists in these novels and stories, women win in the end. They possess a power that their male counterparts do not comprehend. Figurative transformations into animals allow the women to have the attributes of not only humans but of animals as well, and attempted murders remain mere attempts. The women enjoy rest, and give it as well to their anxious and upset male partners. Women in West's fiction are neither doormats nor prostitutes but are strong figures whose powers cannot be contained by the unlikely narrators.

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