

**CAPTIVE BODIES: VICTORIAN CONSTRUCTION OF FEMININITY IN
WUTHERING HEIGHTS AND *THE CRIMSON PETAL AND THE WHITE***

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Abstract: This paper argues that both *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) investigate, expose and condemn the multifaceted inscription of a specific culture on the female body (via the construction of femininity)—the defleshing of female bodies, which in turn makes them docile (at least temporarily). With different degrees of explicitness, the two novels demonstrate how this specific—capitalist, imperialist, patriarchal—culture forces itself onto the bodies of girls/women: the legalized, scientifically justified process whereby female bodies, regardless of class, are defleshed, skinned alive and made to emit signs of subjugation to the patriarchal will—this being their assigned role, without exception, in various male-dominated economies.

Keywords: body, capitalism, captivity, disenfranchisement, docility, fashion, femininity, ghosts, power

Introduction

The starting point of this paper is Foucault's notion of a docile body and Sherry Shapiro's *bodies that are skinned alive*: the thesis, that both Bronte and Faber investigate the culture-specific construction of femininity that in turn produces docile, defleshed and literally/fashionably captive female bodies.

Foucault postulates the docile body in *Discipline and Punish* in wide terms as the body "that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved (136)." While the body has always been the object of power, from the eighteenth century onwards, with the rise of capitalism, it has

become the direct object of various *disciplines* that aim to simultaneously “increase the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminish those same forces (in political terms of obedience) (138).” The result is a disciplined, manipulable body—useful and physically powerful but with political power carefully dissociated from it.

Foucault finds the docility perfectly embodied in the figure of a soldier. John Berger, on the other hand, detects the same paradoxical power and disempowerment in the bodies of workers: the five Turkish men he observes are physically very dissimilar, but “with their clothes taken off, in a public bath, a police or army officer would have little difficulty in identifying them as workers.” Berger continues: “Most workers in the world carry the same physical stigma: a sign of how the labor power of their bodies has been wrenched away from their heads, where their thoughts and imagining continue, but deprived now of the possession of their own days and working energies (qtd. in Shapiro 58).”

Though Foucault’s and Berger’s docile bodies are clearly male, I will apply their insights primarily to the bodies of young girls and women in both *Wuthering Heights* and *The Crimson Petal and the White*—as well as the more general thesis that “[t]he body is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest in it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs (Foucault 25).” Especially relevant for my purposes here, moreover, is Foucault’s clarification that “a useful body and an intelligible body overlap in a docile (manipulable) body (137).” As we will see, Victorian culture, with its ways of “knowing” the female body—making it intelligible by medicine and sexual science in particular—was, in fact, discursively producing the fragile, weak, and ultimately captive female body as the norm. The norm was then reflected in, and reinforced by, fashion, beauty manuals and conduct books that shaped actual women’s bodies, thus creating the vicious circle of self-evident “truths” regarding the (inferior) nature and (limited) usefulness of women that directly affected the position of real women in society.

While building on Foucault, Sherry Shapiro, as a former dancer and a feminist, is more obviously interested in female bodies in the context of capitalism and its “social relations of exploitation and enforced poverty (xiv).” Bodies, she claims, are primary means by which capitalism does its job (xii), and in the process, they are defleshed and skinned alive because “[t]o work within a particular economic structure is to be inserted into a way of life that appropriates

one's productive energies for specific purposes (57).” Within capitalism, in other words, merely having a body is likely to get one exploited – the insight summarized as: “[t]he body is the prison house of injustice (ix).”

Building on these starting points, therefore, this paper argues that both *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) investigate, expose and condemn the multifaceted inscription of a specific culture onto the female body (via the construction of femininity)–the defleshing of female bodies, which in turn makes them docile (at least temporarily). With varying degrees of explicitness, the novels demonstrate how this specific–capitalist, imperialist, patriarchal–culture forces itself onto the bodies of girls/women: the legalized, scientifically justified process whereby female bodies, regardless of class, are defleshed, skinned alive and made to emit signs of subjugation to the patriarchal will–this being their assigned role, without exception, in various male dominated economies. *Defleshed* and *skinned alive* are, moreover, deliberately used without the adverb “metaphorically”: since the metaphors and cultural constructs are enacted on the living bodies, the boundaries between literal and metaphorical are blurred.

The Most Discussed Animal in the Universe: the Context

Women's bodies within capitalism in general are docile bodies: productive and powerful, yet aggressively disempowered–nowadays more than ever by means of mainstream pop culture images and the cosmetics industry, though the law and economics are never far behind. Women in capitalist culture, Shapiro writes, are limited, restricted, and reduced as their bodies and senses are appropriated by either economic or sexual language. Somewhat paradoxically, “the attention of women *is* turned toward their bodies (61, italics mine)”, but it is not the power women are encouraged or even expected to recognize. On the contrary,

they are made to constantly confront their own imperfect bodies. Something is to be hidden (cottage-cheese thighs), shaped (bums of steel), toned-up (flabby tummy), or criticized (being too short) ... The boundaries of this ordering of existence reek with oppression and subordination, and are shot through with questions about the delineated boundaries of human identity (61-2).

It is oppression and subordination which link the modern-day production of female bodies with the Victorian version. In the nineteenth century England, dominated as it was by the mutually reinforcing practices of capitalism/imperialism, economic and philosophical materialism, and, above all, “pervasive patriarchalism” (Stearns 13) distilled into the so-called “Woman Question” and aggressive scientific antifeminism, women’s bodies were discursively, legally and fashionably defleshed, constructed and performed as captive bodies. The outcome of this ubiquitous defleshing of women’s bodies is expressed in a powerful insight shared by both novels and rendered in Gothic terms: the capitalist-patriarchal Victorian culture is in both novels shown to be actively turning living, flesh-and-blood women (of all classes) into *ghosts*. (This also applies to the workers of both sexes, and to the majority of children.) The cultural project of mass ghost production is, ironically, achieved by quite practical actions: by denying women economic independence (the Married Women’s Property Act was passed as late as 1882), by making them legally invisible in marriage (as Cynthia Eagle Russett puts it with brutal clarity, women experienced “legal death” in marriage (8), yet went on living), and by restricting their freedom on all possible levels, including that of the body and body movement—even the intake of air. This results in wasted female bodies in fashionable cages, tied to a specific (domestic) place—ghosts indeed. The ghost production/female docility project was, not suprisingly, sanctioned and carried out by the most esteemed representatives of society--critics, scientists, medical doctors, from Ruskin to Darwin--and was disseminated through a variety of discourses, fashion magazines, beauty manuals and conduct books.

Femininity in Victorian Britain—the culture into which Catherine Earnshaw inevitably *falls* (borrowing the verb, and its implications, from Gilbert and Gubar)—is constructed upon a notion that goes back to Plato and Aristotle and links women with children in terms of their general foolishness and animalistic appetites; in this context, Virginia Woolf’s wry (1929) declaration that the woman is the most discussed animal in the universe (qtd. in Russett 1) is far from accidental. In the *Republic*, for instance, Plato explicitly links women, children and slaves on the basis of their cognitive defects and incontrollable passions; whereas for Aristotle the female sex is a deformity of nature, and women and children resemble one another even in appearance (Cohen and Rutter 4).

However, this long tradition of patriarchal misogyny finds an unparalleled expression in the sciences and disciplines of the nineteenth century, especially sexual science, which, according to Russett, attempted to be far more empirical and precise than Plato and Aristotle and which drew on anthropology, psychology and sociology (3). The *scientific* construction of femininity is all the more pernicious if we bear in mind that it was taking place in an already patriarchal culture and at the time when

science and scientists had never enjoyed greater prestige, a prestige accorded them on the basis of perceived connection between scientific knowledge and the great achievements of the nineteenth century technology and even more because they held out the dazzling promise of certain knowledge (Russett 5).

In this context it is hardly surprising that “[s]exual science spoke with the imperious tone of a discipline newly claiming, and in large measure being granted, decisive authority in matters social as well as strictly scientific (4).”

The disciplines bent on producing docile bodies and, by extension, docile subjects— anatomy, physiology, evolutionary biology, physical anthropology and sociology—were, moreover, guided by the theory of evolution in their construction of “comprehensive theories of sexual difference (Russett 10)”: by the turn of the century “a genuine scientific consensus (10)” emerged. Women were inherently (incurably) different from men in their anatomy, physiology, temperament and intellect. What is meant by “different” is of course “weak”, on both the physical and the intellectual levels. Rather than being recognized as a socially enforced construct, this weakness—reflected in the distribution of social and political power—is regarded as the direct outcome of evolution. Darwin himself famously postulated that “it is in the struggle for existence and (especially) for the possession of women that men acquire their vigor and courage (qtd. in Russett 2).” “Thus women became fragiley attractive, while men grew muscular and courageous, each sex loving in the other what it did not find in itself (12).” Women’s bodies are accordingly scientifically constructed to complement male bodies: they are positioned as the lack of everything defining a man, serving in turn to delineate masculinity. The process is logical: as Calvin Thomas puts it, “[o]ne cannot productively address the production of men’s bodies (masculinized, empowered, and superordinated) without also addressing the production and the oppression of women’s bodies, feminized bodies, queered bodies, and raced bodies (6).”

This theorized physical and intellectual weakness, masquerading as the attractiveness of fragility, is forced onto women's bodies through a variety of practices that intersect in the widely emulated ideal of the "lady" (Silver 35). Being a "lady" in Victorian Britain, as both history and the two novels under discussion demonstrate, meant discipline and restriction of freedom, of the body, of desire and appetite: eating (sparingly) "female" foods (Silver 45-6), tight lacing, dressing, with considerable effort, in wire *cage* crinolines and corsets—the captivity forced onto the body is not merely metaphorical or discursive. On the contrary, the female body as the object of power is made to signal its legal and economic disenfranchisement directly: Silver quotes one nineteenth-century advertisement for a corset which states explicitly that a girl should "lie face down on the floor in order that [her mother] might then place a foot in the small of the back to obtain the necessary purchase on the laces (36)"—the gesture and iconography clearly reminiscent of sado-masochistic practices. Faber also mentions an important detail: Sugar, at one point in the novel, "wields a pair of 'whore's hooks'—curved, long-handled instruments so nicknamed because they enable a woman to don a lady's dress without the aid of a maidservant (762)." A woman who can dress herself is not a lady in the Victorian age: the implications are clear—being a lady equals forced invalidism.

Thus all those pale, weak, breathless, fainting ladies dying in childbirth (and fiery Catherine Earnshaw is, in the end, one of them) who dominate Victorian fiction are not created in the imagination of writers, but are actual products of the culture that creates virtual ghosts out of living women. Speaking of England in 1874, Faber actually coins the phrase *wraith-like ladies*:

... a dead faint is not very difficult to provoke in a modern female: pitilessly tapering bodices, on any woman not naturally thin, present challenges above and beyond the call of beauty. And it must be said that a good few of the wraith-like ladies gliding across St James's Park got out of bed this morning as plump as the belles of the previous generation, but then exchanged their roomy nightgowns for a gruelling session with the lady's-maid. Even if (as is now becoming more common) there are no actual laces to be pulled, there are bound to be leather panels to strap and metal hooks to clasp, choking their wearer's breath, irreparably deforming her rib-cage, and giving her a red nose which must be frequently powdered. Even walking requires more skill than before, on the higher heels of the calf-length boots now fashionable (155)."

The vulnerability and invalidism forced onto concrete bodies, the fact that a woman cannot defend herself (or run in her cage crinoline and calf-length boots), is, moreover, in the context of “social relations of exploitation and enforced poverty” (Shapiro xiv), sexualized and sexually arousing. The *physiognomist* Alexander Walker, for instance, declared with great joy in 1840 that:

[woman’s body is] precise, striking, and often brilliant. From its proportions, it sometimes seems almost aerial; and we would imagine, that, if our hands were placed under the lateral parts of the tapering waist of a woman thus characterized, the slightest pressure would suffice to throw her into the air (qtd. in Silver 44).

This is the ideal of the Victorian age—a woman so emaciated that the slightest pressure, applied correctly, throws her in the air—not merely an angel in the house, but an (almost) actual one. Of course, the problems arise when this almost-angel is supposed to bear children, since that is her role in the family economy, the usefulness and the (re)productive power of her docile, disempowered body inserted in the specific division of labour.

The Heights

In *Wuthering Heights* the legal and discursive production of docile female bodies, which in turn transforms flesh-and-blood women into ghosts, coincides with puberty and is sharply contrasted with the relative freedom of the body in childhood. In this respect, *Wuthering Heights* is both a tragedy of growing up into a specific culture and a Gothic story that begins and ends with ghosts: the children who grow up and into *gentlemen* and *ladies* are, as Beth Torgerson convincingly argues, transformed into vampires, ghosts and (then) corpses in this violent and literally *bloody* process (89-127). Emily Brontë’s verdict on “England in 1847” (Arnold Kettle qtd. in Caldwell 82) is thus clear, sharp and merciless. Furthermore, the novel qualifies as a tragedy in the old-fashioned, Aristotelian sense of the word: the *inevitability* of the bodily transformation of boys and girls with the passage of time necessarily takes place in the context of a specific cultural system that should give it shape and meaning, but here the context is a patriarchal, capitalist-imperialist society, built on the ruthless production and exploitation of numerous disenfranchised *others* (women, lower classes, dark-skinned nations, children).

Bronte's novel, in fact, quite openly demonstrates that while there is no inherent mercy in biology/nature, there is no mercy in culture that is supposed to curb biology either: hence the inevitability of tragedy, Gothicism/fantasy as the preferred mode of expressing verdicts, and the angry responses from early reviewers – more often than not, in ladies' magazines¹.

Despite sharply contrasting childhood and adulthood in terms of freedom and desirability, Bronte does not however subscribe to the Victorian cult of childhood: the above-mentioned tragedy is not the fact that “all children, except one, grow up” (Barrie 1) but the fact that they grow up into the culture that, among other things, posits *The Woman Question*, and, worse, creates the notorious Angel in the House as the solution. The culture that simultaneously cherishes the innocence of childhood and exploits actual children's bodies in mines, factories, and brothels. In other words, the tragedy is not that childhood is necessarily left behind with growing up, but that it is *betrayed*—and what is betrayed the most is bodily freedom from enforced “relations of exploitation” in the form of class, gender and capital. Once a palpable, living reality for Catherine and Heathcliff, this freedom is, with the passage of time and enculturation, displaced into ghostly, haunting yearning, the long ache that finally kills them both.

¹The first responses to Ellis Bell's *Wuthering Heights* are quite revealing—for instance, Graham's *Lady's Magazine* published the following anonymous review in July 1848: “How a human being could have attempted such a book as the present without committing suicide before he had finished a dozen chapters, is a mystery. It is compound of vulgar depravity and unnatural horrors...”

This appeared in *Atlas*, 22 January 1848: “We know nothing in the whole range of our fictitious literature which presents such shocking pictures of the worst forms of humanity. There is not in the entire dramatis persona, a single character which is not utterly hateful or thoroughly contemptible ... Even the female characters excite something of loathing and much of contempt. Beautiful and loveable in their childhood, they all, to use a vulgar expression, ‘turn out badly’.”

But perhaps the most important for our purpose here is the remark published in *Paterson's Magazine* in March 1848: “We rise from the perusal of *Wuthering Heights* as if we had come fresh from a pest-house. Read *Jane Eyre* is our advice, but burn *Wuthering Heights* (How *Wuthering Heights* caused a critical stir when first published in 1847).”

If we bear in mind that the majority of the novel readers (the upstart, new genre that was born and grew with the middle classes) were women, the weight of these remarks becomes greater, and the implicit views on women, literature, and the function of novels not so implicit—novels are apparently supposed to teach women/young girls something about their place and position in society—the advice to read *Jane Eyre* is more than indicative of this enculturation/socializing role of novels in general. *Jane Eyre* is invoked, without doubt, because it ends with marriage, and a new-born son: the girl who once ‘gasped for liberty’ but was wise enough to ‘abandon’ praying for it and to form ‘a humbler supplication’ (Bronte 87) found her place as the active/willing participant in the continuation of patriarchy.

Building on Terry Eagleton's insight (108), it can be argued that what Heathcliff offers Cathy in their childhood is, in fact, total equality—physical and bodily, like everything else in the novel, but not necessarily sexual or gendered. The epitome of this relationship is their sleeping together in a coffin-resembling bed, hiding (though they do not know it yet) from the patient, always-already victorious culture, with its “economies too shameful to be acknowledged” (Foucault 140). It is the equality of two relaxed, free bodies that do not recognize one another as a threat, or an object to be dominated and possessed sexually (yet). Arthur Rimbaud rightly called such a state “dark heaven” in his *Season in Hell*, and described it in terms that apply to Cathy-Heathcliff perfectly, down to their financial situation and their hiding in the coffin-like bed:

... his friendly arms around me were just like heaven—a dark heaven, that I could go into, and where I wanted only to be left—poor, deaf, dumb, and blind. Already, I was getting to depend on it. And I used to imagine that we were two happy children free to wander in a Paradise of sadness.

It is this total, very real, very physical, pre-gender, pre-social, heavenly equality that Bronte, in direct opposition to the dominant Victorian trends regarding children, attributes to childhood. This is what Cathy dies for—not (only) love for a man but the vivid memory that a non-socially mediated (i.e. non-exploitative) physical relationship between human beings was possible once. It is this haunting memory that is slowly killing the “greatest woman of the neighborhood (Bronte 78).” As Shapiro claims, “[m]emories of life where one is able to touch, be touched, feel and respond, becomes the ever-nagging memory within the human body; the desire for pleasure, and for intimacy as experienced in flesh and blood (59).”

Attributing heavenly equality to childhood, on the other hand, does not mean Bronte idealizes it, or Heights for that matter: this is the household in which children's bodies are punished: a servant can slap Cathy across the mouth, Heathcliff is regularly beaten and whipped by the son of the family patriarch, pinched by Nelly Dean, has his ears boxed by Frances. Yet even this, Bronte unambiguously shows, is infinitely more desirable than the “intelligent compromises of adulthood” that Joyce Carol Oates celebrates in her notorious essay—at least the dynamic between “crime” and punishment is very clear: rebellious behaviour of the body is punished on the body.

If the child's/girl's body is freely punished in childhood, the body is also free—the fairy tale beginning of the story has Cathy asking her father for a whip. While Gilbert and Gubar (264) correctly interpret this desire of a six-year-old girl as the yearning of the disempowered for power (and the definition of power is sobering and brutal in its simplicity, as a six-year-old has already learned that it means wielding the whip, hurting someone else), Nelly Dean's plausible explanation is equally important: "She was hardly six years old", Nelly says, "but she could ride any horse in the stable (Bronte 44)." And later, when Heathcliff arrives, their two bodies are in constant movement, they are depicted as running/walking across the moors, and Catherine in particular is always "singing, laughing and plaguing everybody who would not do the same ... defying us with her bold, saucy look, and her ready words, turning Joseph's religious curses into ridicule (49)."

And it is this body—healthy, powerful, subversively energetic--into which a specific culture is inscribed, the body that will be restricted, disciplined, and made captive. In a multilayered scene which marks the beginning of the end, twelve-year-old Cathy is bitten by the Lintons' dog and simultaneously introduced, with the shedding of blood, into puberty *and* society --because puberty means sexuality and it is one of the most important characteristics of civilized society to regulate it. This being Victorian patriarchy, it is female sexuality that is regulated more forcefully, through the economies of marriage and motherhood, but also through fashion. Namely, when Catherine is recognized as one of the Earnshaw children (only then do the Lintons express some concern for her wellbeing; before being identified as their social equal, the bleeding child was not even offered water—unlike the dog) she is asked/forced to stay, fed cakes, given wine and a fashion accessory—"enormous slippers (56)." Just like Heiner Mueller's Ophelia, Cathy is then wheeled to the fire, because she quite literally cannot stand on her own two feet: being a lady is thus exposed as fashionable invalidism forced on the (once) healthy body of the child.

Narrating the "incident of the window" to Nelly Dean, Heathcliff adds an important detail: "they combed her beautiful hair (56)", he says. On one level, this establishes the sinister link with an early version of Snow White: while combing her hair, Snow White's stepmother stabs her in the head with the poisoned comb (the comb which in later versions becomes a poisoned apple) and "kills" her, but not completely. The unconscious girl, neither fully alive nor

fully dead, is then placed in a glass coffin which has to be changed every year because her body, tied to a specific place, continues to grow. This is in itself a perfect insight into the nature of a lady, and into the culture whose ideals are Sleeping Beauties, Snow Whites on display in glass coffins, Angels in the House—expressed using the language of fantasy. But the comb is itself important as it is a fashion detail—unfortunately, not much attention has as yet been devoted to the clothes and the role of fashion in *Wuthering Heights*’ criticism of a society which produces ladies-ghosts and gentlemen-vampires. Cathy is introduced into culture as a child of nature—appropriately barefoot, wearing the socially inappropriate cloak of a dairy-maid--when she reappears at Heights five weeks later she looks like this:

... instead of a wild, hatless little savage jumping into the house, and rushing to squeeze us all breathless, there lighted from a handsome black pony a very dignified person, whose brown ringlets falling from the cover of a feathered beaver, and a long cloth habit, which she was obliged to hold up with both hands that she might sail in. Hindley lifted her from her horse, exclaiming delightedly, ‘Why, Cathy, you are quite a beauty! I should scarcely have known you: you look like a lady now. Isabella Linton is not to be compared with her, is she Frances?’ ‘Isabella has not her natural advantages,’ replied his wife: ‘but she must mind and not grow wild again here. Ellen, help Miss Catherine off with her things—stay, dear, you will disarrange your curls let me untie your hat’ (57).

The difference between Catherine’s earlier appearance and behaviour and what we see now is drastic: the body of a pubescent girl is placed in the kind of clothes that actively prevent free movement—the previously fierce rider now needs a man’s help to lift her from a horse; she “sails” into the house, attention and hands focused on her skirt. Also, accessories such as “a feathered beaver” signal her social status and add value to her body—the implication, in keeping with patriarchal hatred of women, being that girl’s bodies on their own are not worth much (hence the necessity of a dowry). Her energy is conspicuously reduced: as Nelly is pleased to note, there is no more jumping and rushing and squeezing. These changes accompany a new awareness of the importance of money and a new crime-punishment dynamic: for Catherine, at least, it is no longer possible to expect *obvious* physical punishment for deliberate acts of disobedience. As Heathcliff ironically says, “she was a young lady, and they made a distinction between her treatment and mine (56).” As a child, Catherine was slapped by Joseph, but in civilized Britain, in the Age of Progress, young ladies are decidedly *not* slapped (and certainly not by servants), since

that would be barbaric. (Needless to say, the female body is still punished², though arguably in a less obvious way—if we take into consideration wire cage crinolines, laced-up corsets “assaulting the midriff” (Silver 35), self-inflicted starvation/defleshing and a general lack of air—it is not for nothing that the dying Catherine begs Nelly to open the window). The body of a pubescent girl is now a docile, captive body, held still in her assigned position of disenfranchisement with regard to economics and the law, *improved* by clothes and manners that constitute the ideal: the lady.

The body of the lady is, moreover, in the period of three years, progressively defleshed. Once a running and laughing “stout, hearty lass (Bronte 119)”, Catherine becomes a thin, pale specter who dies from a loss of blood occasioned by childbirth (Torgerson 115). Heathcliff calls attention to her physical transformation when, in the most passionate deathbed scene in the history of English literature, he says: “It’s hard to forgive, and to look at those eyes, and feel those wasted hands (144).” Catherine, the lady, the Victorian ideal of femininity, is literally drained of blood, strength, energy, defiance, laughter, life. The transformation happens *before*, not after death, and it is not the result of hysteria in the spoiled, immature girl who did not know what marriage meant—this *is* the lady, the patriarchal ideal, disenfranchised like a child, but without the freedom childhood once allowed: “Exhaustion of body had entirely subdued her spirit, our fiery Catherine was no better than a wailing child (115).” Appropriately, it is Nelly Dean—“patriarchy’s paradigmatic housekeeper” (Gilbert and Gubar 291)—who, perhaps unwittingly, summarizes the great Victorian project of female docility: exhaustion of the body, breaking the spirit of resistance.

Crimson and White

In *The Crimson Petal and the White*, the body of a lady is regulated, disciplined, made docile and defleshed simultaneously by sets of carefully detailed rules/manuals/costumes that determine her appearance, behavior, speaking, walking, sitting and eating habits, and, last but certainly not least, the amount of air she takes in. But this is not the only female body in the novel: the body of “the lady’s social shadow, the prostitute (Faber 156)”, is perhaps more brutally regulated by the twin forces of market economy and patriarchy, without the civilized veneer of marriage. (Though at one point Sugar has to sign a document which explicitly states that from

² This time punished not for disobedience, but for being the female body.

then on she will have sex only with Rackam: Faber unambiguously depicts it in the discourse of marriage.)

While *Wuthering Heights* at least posits the possibility of bodily freedom to be found on the fringes of society/adulthood, in *Crimson Petal*, being a woman (or a child, for that matter) on the fringes of highly urbanized society means being skinned alive. Shapiro's stunning phrase is the apt description of the amount of vulnerability this gender and this social position involve – and it is further accentuated by the ichthyosis that Sugar suffers from, her body painfully aware of every inch of patriarchy inscribing itself into it. Much attention is devoted to Sugar's dry, flaky, peeling skin: yet equally often she is connected with "glistening" fruit—a delicacy to be devoured by the very many *connoisseurs*, "to whom a woman is more than a carcass after all (11)." Being a lady, on the other hand, does not involve a significantly greater degree of comfort for either body or mind—the fasting, starving, constantly ill Mrs Rackham being the indisputable proof. While Sugar "never says no" to anything her customers desire (and they desire a lot, Faber delights in telling us, including putting a knife on her throat "just a little too hard" (83)), Mrs Rackham takes laudanum to quell hunger pangs because in order to stay thin she lives on boiled green beans. (Or, to put it slightly differently, in order to live up to the ideal of the lady, having internalized the norm, she is actively defleshing her own body—with the side effect of dying.)

And they are both ghosts—the fundamental closeness of their respective positions of disenfranchisement and captivity being already hinted at by the word "shadow". Emaciated and (ghastly) pale, Mrs Rackham physically resembles one, embodying—at the price of that very body—the above-mentioned ideal praised by Alexander Walker. (Mentally, she is "off with the fairies (Almond 156)"—or, in her case, angels and nuns and her Savior³.) As a married woman, she does not exist: she is legally a *feme* (sic!) *covert* (covered woman), forming a single body with her

³ Unlike Catherine Linton, Agnes Rackham does not have that powerful memory of a different living (subversive equality and bodily freedom from ladies' magazines and beauty manuals) but there is something, Faber shows, which even education in a boarding school for ladies will not erase: the desire of the body for healing. Intuitively, Agnes knows she is ill, and she knows that the culture, whose feminine ideal she embodies, is making her ill—is killing her, actually. Lacking intellectual framework and instruments to elaborate on her insight (yet another product of her education as a lady), Agnes (dis)places this desire into religious longing and fantasizing: she dreams (and, equally importantly, writes) about the Convent of Health, where she will be nurtured back to life and health by the kind nuns/sisters—this being convent, there are no men. The convent as the ultimate fantasy of a high-class young lady demonstrates just how sickened she is by the culture that so ruthlessly perpetuates male supremacy.

husband--that body, needless to say, being his. (Agnes Rackham, of course, does not understand the law--her education has seen to that.) The terminology and the imagery the phrasing evokes (two bodies coming together, female body sliding fully into male, disappearing in it) sounds like fantasy literature, but it is the actual terminology of the nineteenth century English law. The lady is a covered female, invisible female, controlled on so many levels--from the hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment of her fellow ladies, to the numerous medical examination scenes that, according to Foucault, combine the previous two techniques of control almost ideally (177). In addition, in keeping with Victorian sexual science and the scientific construction of femininity, it is the lady's genitals that are examined regularly as a potential site of trouble: that is how her brain tumour goes undiagnosed.

Sugar, on the other hand, despite her carefully detailed physicality, her body, the smell, the sight, the appetite, the intellect and *life*, is also a ghost--it is no accident that Agnes mistakes her for her guardian angel. (And, moving beyond the initial irony, it is not a mistake.) Just like Agnes Rackham, she does not exist legally, but she is a *feme covert* socially as well: in a point typical of Victorian Britain's hypocrisy, guides to brothels describing (and grading) specific places and the girls' bodies and skills are published and circulated among the Cambridge-educated gentlemen, but are never discussed in polite company. (In society as a whole, interestingly enough, some discourse is permitted, even encouraged, as long as it is within the framework of the Rescue Society, which positions prostitutes as fallen women in need of moral guidance, thus shifting the responsibility from capitalism and patriarchy to individual virtue (or lack thereof).) Without legal or social recognition, earning a living *with her body* as a woman in a male-dominated economy, fiery and intelligent Sugar is also captive and docile, body and mind appropriated and exploited. To give just one illustration, when Rackham loses a governess, Sugar enters his house as a new governess/teacher, while his wife is locked in her bedroom, cutting birds out of her silk dresses. At this point, *The Crimson Petal* becomes a twisted version of *Jane Eyre*: there is a mad wife in the upstairs bedroom, and the governess (who is an obvious interest of the employer's) in the attic. This being a neo-Victorian novel, however, some things are spelled out more clearly and, perhaps, more brutally than in Charlotte Brontë's novel: both the mad wife and the prostitute/governess are at the mercy and whim of the husband, who has this power over them both because he owns the means of production, having inherited the perfume

factory from his father. He stops renting Sugar the house where he used to visit her and brings her under his roof, to teach his child, work as a governess and provide sexual favors—and this time she is not even paid, as in the beginning, but does all that in exchange for food and a roof over her head. Her body, at this point, is multifunctional, efficient and above all captive: the ideal of Victorian patriarchy.

A Way Out?

Wuthering Heights opens with Lockwood's famous observation that he has stumbled upon a "misanthropist's heaven", and "the situation so completely removed from the stir of society (19)." But Lockwood is proved wrong by the story: the body is the prison house of injustice and there is no escaping society in physical life. This, on the other hand, does not mean there is no escape whatsoever—as Catherine discovers very soon, leaving the prison house behind and running into madness, darkness and death—arguably returning to Rimbaud's and her own "dark heaven" of childhood.

Another lady, Mrs Rackham, also runs away, literally. Her destination and the outcome of her journey are not disclosed—however, bearing in mind that she is seriously ill, it is not too difficult to guess. Appropriately for a novel that borrows its title from Tennyson, Agnes ends her life like the Lady of Shalott—her one and only gesture of freedom ends in death. But let us not forget that the Lady of Shalott, just like William Blake, died singing.

Sugar, too, runs away, kidnapping her client-employer's daughter and heading in an unknown direction. The novel ends with the simultaneous affirmation of the woman's stunning physicality—the warmth of her body, the thickness and glossiness of her hair—and the multiple goodbyes, including one from the narrator.

Yet the last sentence is not only a goodbye—in a novel that traces the multi-layered captivities of the majority of the characters, it is an understated cry for freedom, a warning, and a threat in disguise: "But now it's time to let me go."

Conclusion

To work within a particular economic structure, Shapiro claims, is to be inserted into a way of life that appropriates one's productive energies for specific purposes. Furthermore, having

one's productive energies appropriated, being (violently and bodily) inserted into the flow of the economy, equals being skinned alive—the condition Victorian women and the heroines of the two novels under discussion have in common with the working classes, children, and colonized others (though the actual degree of vulnerability varies). Under Victorian capitalist patriarchy, moreover, women's (re)productive energies—their bodies—are quite literally restricted and at the same time made sexually appealing in their vulnerability and the performance of submission, captivity and docility, forced on them through a variety of officially sanctioned practices and discourses, including science and fashion. In both novels, in addition, the cultural construction and positioning of female bodies as docile and captive bodies finds its uncanny expression in the common trope of Gothic fiction, that of a ghost. Both novels, finally, express some hope of escape: more often than not this involves literal escape from physical life, or physical removal from society. A drastic solution such as escape from the body is preferred because, to borrow and rephrase some lines from a well-known protest song, “the only chain that a woman can stand is that chain of hand on hand”: hence the always temporally limited nature of female docility.

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