EMERALD INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNEXIONS

DIVERGENT WOMEN

Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Female Deviance and Dissent

EDITED BY
Lorraine Rumson
Abby Bentham

Divergent Women

Emerald Interdisciplinary Connexions

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Divergent Women: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Female Deviance and Dissent

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For the bad girls.

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Moy McCrory is a Writer and Academic. Author of four books of fiction, two were serialized by the BBC and her work has been translated into 15 languages. Her short fiction is widely anthologized and was included in the seminal *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (2002). She was shortlisted for the Dylan Thomas Award and was a Feminist Book Fortnight Top Ten Author, two years running, and one of the authors chosen by the UK Save our Short story Campaign Top-Twenty Recommended Reads. Dr McCrory is a Hawthornden Fellow,

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Lorraine Rumson is a PhD candidate in English Philology at the Freie Universität Berlin, Germany, where she is researching representations of the Medieval in Victorian Jewish literature. Her secondary research is on Victorian sexuality and pornography, and her chapter 'Kink in the Time of Sexology: An Interdisciplinary Approach to "Abnormal Sexuality" in Victorian Culture' was recently published in the book *Kink and Everyday Life*. Both her doctoral and additional research explores the power of cultural objects to complicate and write back against dominant narratives. She is a prose editor at *Tint* Journal and Network Director of Progressive Connexions Interdisciplinary Network.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Grasping the Broomstick, Cutting the Umbilical Cord

Lorraine Rumson and Abby Bentham

> When she was good, she was very good indeed, and when she was bad, she was horrid.

It may only be a nursery rhyme about a little girl, but these two lines, attributed to nineteenth-century poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, allude to a sharp dichotomy associated with womanhood: a simultaneous expectation of an extreme level of goodness, and the constant spectre of a woman's ability to be not only bad, but *horrid*. The Early Modern European notion of the woman as inherently sinful continues to echo in modern culture, but in tension, as Nancy Cott discussed in her article 'Passionlessness' (1978), with the distinctively Enlightenment notion of the woman as inherently virtuous. Women are simultaneously held to exacting standards of morality rarely expected of men, and brutally punished for even the slightest transgression of those standards.

Cultural expectations about what constitutes a 'good woman' are fraught, contradictory and frequently unspoken, except to point out their transgression. These expectations may include, among others, that the ideal woman is beautiful, doesn't care about her appearance, is young, is emotionally mature, is maternal, generous and infinitely patient. She has sex only with a heterosexual partner sanctified by the institution of marriage; she knows all the sexual tricks of an experienced porn actress. She cleans; she keeps a good house; she is a stellar cook. She does not work; she doesn't depend on her husband for money; she doesn't depend on her family for money. Her makeup is skilfully applied; her makeup is undetectable; she wears no makeup. She has a career; she has a family; she takes her work seriously; she is not ambitious.

It is, of course, quite literally impossible for any woman to successfully live up to all of these expectations. When the boundaries of 'good woman'-hood are so exacting, so impossible to successfully navigate, with disapproval and censure around every bend, a certain freedom can be found in a wholesale rejection of goodness, and value in womanhood found instead in divergence, deviance and dissent.

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This book was born on a wintry weekend in Prague, Czech Republic, on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic. The writers featured in this book had all travelled to Prague for a global interdisciplinary conference with the title 'Evil Women/Women and Evil.' Over the course of the two-day conference, however, it became clear that, by sheer coincidence, almost everyone who had responded to the title 'Evil Women' had come to Prague with a distinctly unorthodox understanding of the term 'evil.'

Over and over, we found ourselves using 'evil' as a tongue-in-cheek descriptor for women who we, the authors, found sympathetic, even delightful. We called *our* women – cackling witches, childfree women, struggling mothers, insecure teenagers and persecuted innocents – 'evil,' a religiously inflected, hyper-moral term, in acknowledgement of their divergence from the fossilised, monocle-popping, self-styled 'traditional' morality that underlies many long-standing narratives of misogyny.

While it was not our original stated goal to reclaim the descriptor 'evil,' we found in the word an expansiveness, a much wider range of options than those implied by the word 'good.' This book emerged, therefore, with a focus on divergence, deviance and dissent as elements of women's experiences in the world. The contributions to this volume, overwhelmingly, push back against the categorizations and restrictions that use 'goodness' to circumscribe women's behaviour: restrictions on their bodies, their moralities, their roles as mothers, their striving for self-actualization and their rights to life.

The contributions of this book are spread globally – from North America, Europe, Africa, West and East Asia and Australia – and our authors bring into the volume their unique perspectives on what it means to be a divergent woman. In an increasingly globalized world, cultural narratives of female deviance collide, interact and birth new expectations for womanhood. Some chapters in this book deal with transnational corpuses, such as the digital sphere, and the colonially disseminated and idolized works of Anglophone canon, demonstrating the ability of national and linguistic cultural superpowers to spread their narratives of femininity across the globe. Conversely, other chapters share intimate experiences of girls' and women's tangible, specific lives in such diverse settings as mid-century Ireland and North Korea. The specificity of these experiences reminds us that narratives about women are not merely vague cultural inputs but realities of our lives.

Our contributors explore women's divergence through a variety of lenses, including law, history, psychoanalysis, literature and cultural studies. Many of the chapters also contain auto-ethnographic components – after all, we authors also live within circumscribed gender roles, navigate misogyny within our lives, and many of us have ourselves, at some time or other, been looked upon as evil (divergent, deviant, dissenting) women. Running through all the chapters is a consistent awareness that each perspective is only one facet of the experience of womanhood and deviance in the world, and that through collecting this multiplicity of perspectives, we may hope to come closer to an understanding of the ways that these narratives have affected and continue to affect the real lives of women who are subjected to them.

It is worth noting that, throughout the book, our authors have generally not found it within the scope of their writing to complicate the term 'woman' in itself. While the boundaries and borders of womanhood are themselves culturally contingent, and each individual author's conception of 'woman' is certainly not identical to another individual author's, we have chosen to generally leave the notion of 'woman' intact in order to explore and emphasize the possibilities for divergence within established cultural frameworks for gender. The focus of this book is specifically on people who identify and are culturally identified as women, female and (to some extent) feminine, and who enact deviance and dissent from within that specific position. However, we should not neglect to note that gender nonconformity is a powerful example of dissent, and we look forward to further work in this field that dedicates space to people who deconstruct, complicate and cross the borders in and out of the categorization of 'womanhood.'

The section titles of this book, 'Maiden,' 'Mother' and 'Crone,' are borrowed from the terminology of the Triple Goddess, an archetypal understanding of feminine spirituality particularly prominent in contemporary neo-Pagan practice. The Triple Goddess has her origins in antiquity, and the modern practice of conceptualizing a Goddess or divine feminine power in these terms can be attributed to Elinor Gadon's canonical book *The Once and Future Goddess*. 'We can easily identify the Triple Goddess,' Gadon writes, 'as a young maiden, a birth-giving matron, and an old woman or crone – who represents the life cycle of women' (Gadon, 1989, p. 29). This spiritual concept is expanded to represent further elements of the natural and supernatural world: '[t]he Triple Goddess was associated with the three phases of the moon – waxing, full, and waning – as well as the three worlds – heaven, earth, and the underworld' (Gadon, 1989). Apart from any specific historical roots, the practice of 'spiritual feminism' (Long, 1994, p. 12) has found this conceptualization of the divine feminine to be a meaningful articulation of stages or roles in women's lives. The idea that women's lives are organized – either naturally or culturally – around life stages as a 'maiden,' a 'mother' and a 'crone' has resonated with many people both historically and contemporarily, yet it can also represent precisely the kind of simplified, 'good woman' paradigm that we seek to diverge from in this book. For this reason, we have chosen to organize this book with this paradigm, and within each section, explore women who are both associated with this stage of life and divergent from it. Each section of the book begins with a brief reflection on the ideals associated with these conceptions of phases of womanhood, and the tensions that arise for women living through them.

We have three main reasons for choosing this model to organize our writers' work. The first reason is that the 'Maiden, Mother, Crone' designation has a spiritual weight associated specifically with women, womanhood and femininity. The choice of an iconically 'feminine' model for organizing the chapters is a statement of purpose: this is a book about women. Furthermore, the spiritual origins of the model in the Goddess harken to the religious implications of our original title, 'evil women.' We question, reject and step outside of the models for women presented or implied by the religious ideals of secularized Christianity, and substitute our own models for women's spiritual worthiness.

The second reason is that these phases of life represent their own internal paradigms of ideal behaviour, and within each period of life, women diverge from those ideals. Behaviour that may be acceptable for a woman in the 'maiden' stage of her life – for example, childlessness, romanticism or certain forms of sexual exploration – may be distinctly unacceptable for women who are 'supposed to be' mothers. The 'crone' phase of women's lives in the modern world, at the intersection of ageism and misogyny, carries a particular baggage of fear and anxiety, while also prospectively representing a freedom from some of the responsibilities of the mother or visibility of the maiden. The chapters in this book explore the experiences of women moving through these phases of life, and the ways in which they diverge from the social expectations and cultural requirements placed upon them at every turn. The ideals associated with these phases of life – the innocence of the maiden, the nurturing of the mother and the wisdom of the crone – are complicated by the challenges, personalities and experiences of the women explored in this book.

Thirdly, by recognizing that the phases of women's growth and development are interlinked as part of the whole – the Triple Goddess or goddess with three aspects – this model gestures to the way in which many of the chapters within the book straddle the different sections. In her creative approach to the myths of the Triple Goddess, *Virgin Mother Crone*, Donna Wilshire describes, '[t]he relics and symbols that remain of our oldest deity reveal that She – while ever experienced as Oneness, as the whole of many inter-related parts – was often perceived to manifest in three general aspects, each a cosmic reflection of the functions and roles of an ordinary woman – of a virgin-maiden, a mother, or a crone' (Wilshire, 1994, p. 21). The 'bleed' from one section to the next mirrors not only the movement between different phases of life, but also the principle that each person has within them the elements of 'Maiden,' 'Mother' and 'Crone,' no matter where they are in their own life cycle. In this book, we seek to put these inter-related parts into dialogue with each other.

Throughout the process of this book, our writers have been in contact with each other, meeting for collaborative writing sessions over Zoom, calling to discuss the organization of the book, seeing each other's work at various stages and drawing upon their fellow authors' ideas to develop their own thinking. The result is an implicitly dialogic and interconnected volume, where concerns and lines of argument interweave the diverse disciplinary and cultural backgrounds represented by the various chapters.

The 'Maiden' section begins with an exploration of adolescent girlhood in Simmone Howell and Bec Kavanagh's 'Portrait of the Monster as a Young Girl: An Interactive Dialogue.' Howell and Kavanagh reflect through critical theory and popular text on the ways that young and adolescent female bodies are imagined as monstrous – through fat, sexual characteristics, or lack thereof. The interaction between the theoretical and the personal continues in Moy McCrory's 'Spiteful Spirits: Projection and Blaming in Women's Lives and Mother-Daughter Narratives,' which explores the narratives of blame, particularly blame and mother–daughter relationships, in art, theory and literature, and the power they have over young women's psyches. The blaming present in so many relationships

between daughters and mothers is explored through McCrory's recounting of youthful trips to galleries that hung paintings of women blamed for a variety of immoralities. Finally, in 'Witch Hunt: The Media's Obsession With One Infamous Canadian,' Jane Barker brings the discussion of women and the ways that they are constructed as evil to the intersecting fields of criminology and media studies. Barker relates the ways that newspapers wrote about Karla Homolka, one half of the Canadian couple nicknamed the 'Ken and Barbie killers,' who completed her 12-year prison sentence for involvement with her husband's crimes of sexual assault and murder, but whose release has not freed her from a barrage of media attention claiming that she deserves to remain associated with her crimes forever.

Our section on 'Mothers' begins with an articulation of the power of women to create, to write stories about women informed by but not restricted by their own life experience, in Tammy Dalldorf and Sylvia Tloti's 'The Paradox of Female Villainy in Mary Robinson's *Walsingham* and Charlotte Smith's *The Young Philosopher*.' This trip to the eighteenth century encourages readers to consider the complex interplay of misogyny and female empowerment at play both in the villains of the novels, and in the lives of female novelists themselves. In a more recent example of women's experiences as both mothers and writers, Soonbae Kim introduces readers to *My Mother's Story*, a graphic novel about a young woman's life in North Korea, in 'Resubjectivation of the Female Voice in Eunsung Kim's *My Mother's Story*.' Drawing on scholarship around Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Kim explores the tensions of mother–daughter relationships in *My Mother's Story*, as well as the power of memoir.

The next two chapters deal more literally with the specific and intense cultural pressure of motherhood. In 'Off With Their Wombs! Cultural Depictions of Women's Rebellion Against Motherhood,' Elif Çakmak and Lorraine Rumson read a series of canonical western cultural texts in relation to their depictions of women who refuse or fail to have or care for children. These women, villainized variously for their childlessness, their resentment of motherhood, or their exploitation of their children, form a backdrop of counter-examples – bad mothers, to be contrasted with the ideals of good mothers. Following from that and focussing on the ways narratives against motherhood continue to be constructed, Sam George-Allen's empathetic and auto-ethnographic 'Beyond Mandatory Motherhood: How Childfree Women Use Digital Spaces to Redefine Femininity' explores childfreeness as an identity women can develop, refine and reemphasize in the modern world, both beyond and in relation to the sinister figures of Çakmak and Rumson's chapter.

As we move into the 'Crone' section, a particularly well-known example of a sinister mother is given her due in 'All About Snow White's Mother' by Naomi Govreen. Attending to the psychoanalytic value of fairy tale stories, Govreen explores the role of the mother (or, more familiarly to western readers, 'wicked stepmother') in Snow White stories of the Muslim-Arab world. She explores the psychoanalytic experiences these characters undergo, in relation to the familiar and often anxiety-provoking experience of ageing. Finally, in 'Forgiving European Witches: The Case for Pardons and Memorials,' Catherine Jenkins makes

the emphatic case for exonerating women who were once called evil by issuing pardons and memorials for women who were accused of witchcraft and put to death in the European witch-hunts of the Early Modern period. Despite claims that it is 'inappropriate to pardon those who had been found guilty under the laws of their time,' Jenkins argues that the memorialization of victims whose deaths were made under unjust laws, particularly those targeting marginalized identities such as women, is a crucial step towards justice.

This book makes space for both explicit and implicit experiences of the impacts of narratives, history, media and art about divergent women on the lives the authors – and, we hope, on you, the readers. We all live within constructed conceptions of the ideal behaviour for a 'good woman,' and are familiar with punishments associated with deviating from those ideals. We hope that, as you read, you will find parallels to the gendered expectations and pressures you encounter in your own lives, and perhaps will join us in finding an expansive, tongue-in-cheek, or reclamatory use for the description 'evil.'

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Section 1
Maiden

In the foggy borderlands between girlhood and womanhood, narratives of appropriate behaviour are enforced with newfound vigour, curtailing wayward youth and corralling women into adherence to the expectations of the adult world. This corralling takes a variety of forms in a variety of contexts, both subtle and overt. Developing bodies are punished, sometimes violently, for their failure to adhere to pristine standards of mass media depictions. Understandings of the world are shattered as new dynamics emerge, and girls are accused of naïvité for their failure to keep up, or cynicism for their ability to. Emotional outbursts are suppressed. Sexuality is circumscribed: be sexual but not too sexual, erotically tempting but not erotically aggressive, pair off with a nice man as quickly as possible. As Wilshire points out in *Virgin Mother Crone*, 'It must be noted here that historically "virgin" does not mean "celibate" but rather refers to "an autonomous female who belongs to herself"' (Wilshire, 1994, p. 21). Autonomy and the ability to belong to oneself are contested grounds for young women. In the 'Maiden' section of this book, Bec Kavanagh, Simone Howell, Moy McCrory, and Jane Barker explore the ways that young women's bodies and minds are policed, and their abilities to belong to themselves are challenged, punished, violated, lost and reclaimed.

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