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Author(s): Naomi Scheman

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# Missing Mothers/Desiring Daughters: Framing the Sight of Women

Naomi Scheman

How could she—oh how could she have become a part of the picture on the screen, while her mother was still in the audience, out there, in the dark, looking on?

—Olive Higgins, *Stella Dallas*

Recent work in feminist film theory has focused on the nature of the gaze, both of the characters within a film and of the spectator addressed by the film. Questions have been raised about the relations of the gaze to subjectivity, to gender, and to sexuality, and about the relations among those three.<sup>1</sup> In particular, it has been argued, most notably by Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,”<sup>2</sup> that the

This essay is a response to a number of people and events: to Stanley Cavell, who evoked my serious interest in films; to discussions with the students in a course I taught using *Pursuits of Happiness* in the University of Minnesota English and philosophy departments in the fall of 1984; and to several years of discussing related issues in a faculty reading group. My thanks to all, especially to my colleagues John Mowitt, Martin Roth, and Eileen Sivert. Thanks also to Marilyn Frye for helpful discussions about the value and limits of theory, and to Michael Root for conversation, encouragement, and editing advice. I received massive and invaluable editorial help from Ruth Wood, whose strenuous attempts to produce clarity have, I hope, borne fruit. My research time was supported by a Bush Sabbatical Fellowship from the University of Minnesota.

1. See, for example, E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York, 1983). See also Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington, Ind., 1984); hereafter abbreviated *AD*.

2. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16 (Autumn 1975): 6–18; reprinted in *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, ed. Bill Nichols, 2 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1976–85) 2:303–15.

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cinematic gaze is gendered male and characterized by the taking of the female body as the quintessential and deeply problematic object of sight. In such accounts, the female gaze—and along with it female subjectivity—comes to seem impossible.

Yet women do, of course, see movies. Furthermore, many classic Hollywood films were made with a specifically female audience in mind, clearly not addressing that audience as though it were in masculine drag. And there are movies, in particular many of the same movies, that include women characters who see in ways that are coded as distinctively female.<sup>3</sup> My epigraph, from the novel on which the classic maternal melodrama *Stella Dallas* was based,<sup>4</sup> poignantly suggests that neither the presence of active women on the screen nor the acknowledged presence of viewing women in the audience by itself challenges the patriarchal logic of the gaze. There are, however, also specifically feminist films, made from and for an oppositional spectatorial position, and there are feminist film viewers, critics, and theorists looking at all sorts of films.<sup>5</sup> How shall we account for all these gazes and for the subjectivities behind them?

These issues are addressed elsewhere in feminist theory, for example, in studies of the normative maleness of the scientist, the philosopher, the artist, and the citizen.<sup>6</sup> Female subjectivity, then, may often seem

3. For an account of the issues raised by the centrality of women both in the narrative and in the address of a film genre, see Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940's* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987).

4. Quoted in Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor's *Stella Dallas*," *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* 16 (Fall 1983): 81–85.

5. In addition to the works already cited, see the essays in the "Feminist Criticism" section of *Movies and Methods*; Michelle Citron et al., "Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics," *New German Critique* 13 (Winter 1978): 83–107; Judith Mayne, "Feminist Film Theory and Criticism," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 11 (Autumn 1985): 81–100; and Mary C. Gentile, *Film Feminisms: Theory and Practice* (Westport, Conn., 1985).

6. On the scientist, see Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Science and Gender* (New Haven, Conn., 1985). On the philosopher, see *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Dordrecht, 1983); and Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy* (Minneapolis, 1984). On the artist, see Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in *Art and Sexual Politics: Women's Liberation, Women Artists, and Art History*, ed. Thomas B. Hess and Elizabeth C. Baker (New York, 1973), pp. 1–39; and Germaine Greer, *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work* (New York, 1979). On the citizen, see Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton, N.J., 1979).

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**Naomi Scheman** is associate professor of philosophy and women's studies at the University of Minnesota. She is currently working on the roles played by bodies and by differences in modern and feminist post-modern accounts of knowledge.

oxymoronic; indeed some essays appear to demonstrate conclusively the impossibility of their having been authored.<sup>7</sup> There are at least three possible responses to the recognition that women do see, desire, and know despite the compelling theoretical demonstrations of the maleness of the gaze, of desire, and of epistemic authority: one is that we do it in drag, by tapping what Freud called our innate bisexuality;<sup>8</sup> the second is that we do it as socially constructed females, in ways masculinist regimes have uses for; and the third is that we, somehow, impossible as it may seem, do it in creative rebellion, as feminists.

The first option is *theoretically* unproblematic, once one accepts that gender is socially constructed: the norms of maleness are learnable, and some girls and women, especially those of privileged race and class, have of late been allowed or even encouraged to learn some of them, such as those governing the academic and work worlds.<sup>9</sup> It is the latter two, more problematic but also more promising, options that interest me here. In particular, I am interested in looking at the second option for clues as to how the theoretically impossible third option—feminist subjectivity (or sexuality or desire or knowledge or agency)—can exist.

Patriarchy is like concrete: it is structured seamlessly and allows nothing through—in theory. In actuality, however, there are ailanthus trees, which can grow in any crack in the concrete and proliferate by dropping seeds into new and widened cracks, producing more ailanthus trees and less and less perfect concrete. There is nothing about ailanthus trees in concrete theory, and there is no ailanthus theory: the cracks are random from the perspective of the concrete, and the trees grow wherever they can find a foothold; there's no telling where. A theory of patriarchy is useful since its seamlessness and perfect structure provide a coherent logic that is genuinely explanatory, but such a theory does not provide the whole truth. Women's socially obedient gazes, desires, and thoughts are part of what patriarchy allows for and part of what we can theorize: they are part of the concrete. But they are also good places to look for cracks and to plant the seeds for the ailanthus trees of feminist oppositional consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

7. The best Anglo-American example of this phenomenon that I am aware of is Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," *Signs* 7 (Spring 1982): 515–44.

8. For one account of how we do this, see Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946)," *Framework* 15–17 (1981): 12–15.

9. Actually learning and living these norms is, of course, far from unproblematic for any woman. For accounts of the inherent tensions and instabilities, see *ibid.*; AD; and Mayne, "Feminist Film Theory and Women at the Movies," in *Profession 87*, ed. Phyllis Franklin for the Modern Language Association of America (New York, 1987), pp. 14–19.

10. Similar approaches to feminist theorizing can be found in AD and in Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1986). See also Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Trumansburg, N.Y., 1983); hereafter abbreviated PR.

One possible place to start looking for oppositional consciousness is in the films Stanley Cavell discusses in *Pursuits of Happiness*, extremely popular films that are little discussed by feminist film theorists.<sup>11</sup> These comedies from the thirties and forties, particularly as Cavell discusses them, seem to offer counterexamples to the gaze-as-male theories. For example, though it has been argued that both the spectatorial gaze *at* a movie and the gazes of characters *within* a movie are normatively male—and conversely, that the female gaze is absent, stigmatized, or punished—in these films women are allowed, even encouraged, to look to (and for) their heart's content. Katharine Hepburn is told explicitly and repeatedly in *The Philadelphia Story* that to be a “real woman” she has to learn not to be a beautiful statue; she has to become a seer, not the seen. Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday* is a reporter, Ruth Hussey in *The Philadelphia Story* a photographer, and Hepburn in *Adam's Rib* a lawyer, who, although punished for making a spectacle of Spencer Tracy, transgresses—if at all—only in the nature of her orchestration of the gazes in the courtroom, not in her command of the gaze *per se*. Similarly, when Barbara Stanwyck as the Lady Eve undermines the authority of Henry Fonda's senses, we are allowed to sympathize with Fonda without concluding that epistemic authority in general is more rightfully his than hers.

On the narrative level, too, these films seem counterexemplary, and they address many of the same issues raised by discussions of the gaze, particularly by those twentieth-century theories of narrative that see the gaze as gendered male by its placement in a male Oedipal frame.<sup>12</sup> In these theories, the Oedipus story is seen as the quintessential narrative, and exclusive focus on the male version stems from the widespread acceptance of an essentially Freudian account of the genesis of female sexuality as the learned foregoing of active desire. The female story cannot stand as its own narrative; rather, we have the story of how a girl comes to embody the desired goal and the reward of the male developmental quest. But the fates of the heroines of the *Pursuits of Happiness* films are as interesting and as connected to their own desires as are the fates of the heroes, and the paths to those fates are as complex and as much, if not more, the subject of the films: these women are hardly milestones along a male Oedipal journey.

Connecting the issues of the female gaze and of the female narrative is the issue of desire. As Cavell repeatedly stresses, a central theme of these films is the heroine's acknowledgment of her desire and of its true

11. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981); hereafter abbreviated *PH*. The films Cavell discusses are *The Lady Eve*, *It Happened One Night*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *The Philadelphia Story*, *His Girl Friday*, *Adam's Rib*, and *The Awful Truth*.

12. See *AD*, pp. 103–57.

object—frequently the man from whom she mistakenly thought she needed to be divorced. The heroine's acknowledgment of her desire, and of herself as a subject of desire, is for Cavell what principally makes a marriage of equality achievable. It is in this achievement (or the creation of the grounds for the hope of it) that Cavell wants to locate the feminism of the genre: it is the "comedy of equality" (*PH*, p. 82). There is, therefore, an obvious explanation in Cavell's terms for the anomalous nature of these films: if their vision is explicitly feminist in embracing an ideal of equality, in approvingly foregrounding female desire, and in characterizing that desire as active and as actively gazing, then they would not be expected to fit an analysis based on films whose view of female desire and the female gaze is passive, absent, or treacherous. If we accept Cavell's readings, these films provide genuine counterexamples to feminist claims of the normative masculinity of film (in general or in Hollywood).

My affection for these films, and the ways in which Cavell accounts for that affection, leads me to want to believe that his account, or something like it, is true: that there did briefly emerge a distinctively feminist sensibility in some popular Hollywood movies, one which unsurprisingly succumbed to the repressive redomestication of women in the postwar years. But, for a number of reasons, I can't quite believe it. Some version of the feminist critical theory of popular cinema does, in an odd way, apply to these movies: they are, to use a frequent phrase of Cavell's, the exceptions that prove the rule. Though they do have some claim to being considered feminist, their feminism is seriously qualified by the terms in which it is presented, by the ways in which female desire and the female gaze are framed.

The clue to my unease with Cavell's readings, with the films themselves, and with the feminism they embody is found in the double state of motherlessness (neither having nor being one) that is requisite for the heroines. By exploring the absence of mothers and maternity in these comedies, I want to illuminate some features of the distinctively female, though only stuntedly feminist, gaze they depict. I will argue that such a gaze is one a masculinist world has little trouble conscripting, and that its incompatibility with maternity functions to keep it within bounds. Turning then to melodrama, which, as Cavell has argued, is the cinematic home of the mother/daughter relationship,<sup>13</sup> I want to explore a different, but equally conscriptable, female gaze—the maternal. Finally, I want to suggest that we can open a space for the *feminist* gaze by redrawing the lines of sight.

13. See Cavell, "Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Melodrama of the Unknown Woman," in *Images in Our Souls: Cavell, Psychoanalysis, and Cinema*, ed. Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan, Psychiatry and the Humanities, vol. 10 (Baltimore, 1987), pp. 11–43. A revised and expanded version of this essay appears in *The Trial(s) of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Françoise Meltzer (Chicago, 1988), pp. 227–58.

*Missing Mothers/Desiring Daughters: Take One*

... this turning from the mother to the father points ... to a victory of intellectuality over sensuality—that is, an advance in civilization, since maternity is proved by the evidence of the senses while paternity is a hypothesis, based on an inference and a premiss. Taking sides in this way with a thought-process in preference to a sense perception has proved to be a momentous step.

—Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*

Lost to the daughter, ... [the mother] nevertheless rules her daughter's life with the injunctions of the culture-mother: "You must bury your mother, you must give yourself to your father."

—Sandra M. Gilbert, "Life's Empty Pack"

The question then arises of how this happens: in particular, how does a girl pass from her mother to an attachment to her father? or, in other words, how does she pass from her masculine phase to the feminine one to which she is biologically destined?

—Freud, "Femininity"

Cavell explicitly acknowledges that the motherlessness of the heroines in the films he discusses poses a problem. In his most extended discussion of the missing mothers, he admits that "no account of these comedies will be satisfactory that does not explain this absence, or avoidance," since it raises "a question about the limitations of these comedies, about what it is their laughter is seeking to cover" (*PH*, p. 57). The problem is not unique to these films: the mothers of comedic heroines are quite commonly absent—not dead or gone, but simply unremarkably non-existent, as they are notably in *The Lady Eve* and *It Happened One Night*. Although he recognizes the importance and the depth of this odd and troubling feature of the apparent paternal parthenogenesis of comedic heroines, Cavell goes on not to explain it, but to "offer three guesses about regions from which an explanation will have to be formed" (*PH*, p. 57)—the social, the psychological or dramatic, and the mythical. My sense is that to the extent that such explanations will be adequate, those very explanations undercut the laughter. The "limitations of these comedies" are, from a feminist perspective, fatal, if not to our pleasure in them,<sup>14</sup> then to our taking that pleasure seriously in the ways Cavell would urge us to do. The motherlessness of the heroines is the clue to the male framing of the desiring female gazes that provide so much of that pleasure.

14. On the loss of pleasure attendant on feminist film criticism, see Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 2:306.

In his guess about the region of the social, Cavell notes the generation to which the absent mothers would have belonged. He refers to this generation as the one that “won the right to vote without at the same time winning the issues in terms of which voting mattered enough” (*PH*, p. 58). As a result, the following generation—that of the heroines of these films—was the first in which American women grew up with the expectation of formal political equality, one of the effects of which is to raise the hopes of substantive equality and to make the traditional compromises of female selfhood no longer seem inevitable. Cavell suggests that the challenges thereby offered might appear sufficiently terrifying to account for the daughters’ repression of the memory of those responsible for creating them. As an explanation, this is puzzling. The maternal erasure would seem to be in the service of the repression of the terror of those challenges, but it is integral to Cavell’s account that the daughters confront the challenges: why should they repress the mothers?

More adequate explanations can be found by exploring Cavell’s other two regions, the psychological or dramatic and the mythical. The two are closely connected, not surprisingly, given Cavell’s reliance on Freud and Freud’s reliance on mythology.<sup>15</sup> Initially, however, Cavell’s guess about the psychological or dramatic reasons for motherlessness is also puzzling, since it focuses not on the absence of women’s mothers but on the presence of their fathers—as though one could have only one true parent. His argument is that “there is a closeness children may bear to the parent of the opposite sex which is enabling for a daughter but crippling for a son” (*PH*, p. 57). (The “crippled sons” in a number of these films are men who are permanently attached to their mothers; they are the men the heroines mistakenly turn to in flight from their own desires.) Beyond the puzzling shift of attention from absent mothers to present fathers, there is the further puzzle about why this should be so: why should the love of a daughter for her father stand less in the way of her coming to love someone else than a son’s love for his mother?

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the answer is that a girl’s connection to her father is inherently more fungible—more replaceable by a substitute—than is a boy’s connection to his mother.<sup>16</sup> The maternal connection for both males and females is the original one, the one wherein attachment is initially learned. The attachment of a girl to her father is always already a substitute; she enters into it through learning what it is to transfer love and desire from one object to another: it is the model of fungibility.

15. Cavell makes his reliance on Freud explicit in “Freud and Philosophy: A Fragment,” *Critical Inquiry* 13 (Winter 1987): 386–93. This “fragment” has been integrated into Cavell’s longer essay, “Psychoanalysis and Cinema.”

16. I am indebted to Ronald de Sousa for the application of the concept of fungibility to emotions and their objects. See de Sousa, “Self-Deceptive Emotions,” in *Explaining Emotions*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980), esp. pp. 292–94.



Males are supposed to learn to shift their desire from their mothers under the threat of castration attendant on Oedipal desires. For boys the Oedipus complex "is not simply repressed, it is literally smashed to pieces by the shock of threatened castration. . . . In normal, or, it is better to say, ideal cases, the Oedipus complex exists no longer, even in the unconscious; the super-ego has become its heir."<sup>17</sup> In the case of a girl's attachment to her father, no such destruction is either possible or necessary: it is impossible, since in Freud's view she is already castrated, and it is unnecessary, since, being both passive and secondary, her desire for her father poses no threat to her future development. What is necessary in her case is precisely that such an attachment occur, that is, that she shift her desire away from her mother.

Freud's account of the shift in a girl's desire, which takes her recognition of "the fact of being castrated" as its primary cause, is notoriously problematic.<sup>18</sup> But even if one rejects completely the idea that a girl's turning away from her mother pivots on her discovery of the supposedly obvious and natural inferiority of her genitals, one still needs to explain how the socially mandated shift of love object from mother to father could occur. Presumably such a shift requires some powerfully motivating forces, however different from the ones Freud postulates. It also must leave some considerable residue of loss, a grief at the heart of socially acceptable femininity, which Freud barely glimpses. Cavell more than glimpses it, but he leaves it largely buried: unearthed it would dishearteningly reveal the costs, in the world Freud describes, of comedy, and challenge its definition of ending in happiness defined as marriage. By the rules of such a world, not only is a girl's attachment to her father not inhibiting of later attachments, but it is positively necessary in establishing her heterosexuality by breaking her attachment to her mother beyond recollection.

Cavell notes that marriage in classical romance requires the discovery of one's origins, the identity of one's parents; in contrast, the comedies of remarriage (as he refers to the films in *Pursuits of Happiness*) require that one learn and acknowledge one's sexual identity. But typically for the heroine in both sorts of narrative, the acknowledgment of parents is the acknowledgment of fathers and the mandated repression of mothers, a move that is of a piece with the acknowledgment of (hetero)sexual identity. The girl is supposed to claim heterosexuality as her genuine sexual identity, the deepest expression of self, not just as a "haven of refuge" from the ambivalences of her attachment to her mother, as Freud

17. Sigmund Freud, "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1953–74), 19:257.

18. See *ibid.*, 19:253. See also Freud, "Femininity," *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, *Standard Edition*, 22:126; hereafter abbreviated "F."

describes its initial attraction ("F," 22:129). Repressing the attachment to her mother amounts to identifying her father as her true parent, forgetting the love and desire that preceded her love and desire for him. Doing that also requires learning *how* to do it, that is, learning how to dispose of desire according to demands that are external to it, through cooperating in the fiction that the desires she newly acquires were the ones that were there all along.

Through such cooperation girls are learning that there is a connection between the particular fungibility of female desire and the normative passivity of that desire. By defining female desire as responsive to male—in the first instance, paternal—desire, the culture inscribes "father-daughter incest [as] a culturally constructed paradigm of female desire."<sup>19</sup> The paradigm shapes that desire as normatively passive, as responsive to another's active desire, even if only fantasized:

Along with the abandonment of clitoral masturbation a certain amount of activity is renounced. Passivity now has the upper hand, and the girl's turning to her father is accomplished principally with the help of passive instinctual impulses. You can see that a wave of development like this, which clears the phallic activity out of the way, smooths the ground for femininity. If too much is not lost in the course of it through repression, this femininity may turn out to be normal.

Freud takes it that a girl's initial turning to her father is motivated by the wish of acquiring a penis from him, but the "feminine situation is only established . . . if the wish for a penis is replaced by one for a baby" ("F," 22:128), that is, if the desire for libidinal activity is renounced. The wish for a baby and other, ensuing, passive sexual aims require for their (fantasized) fulfillment another's (fantasized) activity. To fantasize the satisfaction of passive desires is to fantasize being the object of another's active desire. (The situation is, of course, not symmetric: one can, unfortunately, in fantasy or reality play out one's active desires on another whether the corresponding passive desire is present or not.) Thus, a father's desire—at least as represented in a daughter's mind—is a central feature of the acquisition of femininity: she learns to desire someone who (she fantasizes or believes) desires her. And, under the conditions of patriarchal control and compulsory heterosexuality,<sup>20</sup> her desire, if it enters into consideration at all, is meant to become fungible more or

19. Sandra M. Gilbert, "Life's Empty Pack: Notes Toward a Literary Daughteronomy," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (Mar. 1985): 372.

20. "Compulsory heterosexuality" is a term introduced by Adrienne Rich to refer to the complex of social, cultural, economic, political, and psychological forces that affect women's eroticism in heterosexist and male-dominant cultures. See Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5 (Summer 1980): 631–60.

less on demand. Like Sleeping Beauty, she awakens to the man who lays claim to her.

This peculiar fungibility of female desire is very different from the fungibility of male desire. Men may be expected to shift their desires from one woman to another with ease and frequency, but they are not expected to desire automatically those who desire them. This difference is linked to the different fates of the attachment boys and girls have to their mothers. The "smashing to pieces" of the male Oedipus complex leaves the boy in possession of a large amount of power in the service of his becoming a civilized adult, largely in the form of the superego. Although he can experience this power as punitive and constraining, it is fundamentally empowering of him as an active member of society. Not so for the girl: her love for her mother is not transformed but repressed, and it succumbs to narcissistic humiliation, bitter disappointment, and a sense of betrayal. Finally, it is replaced by a love structured by her passive desires and a learned responsiveness to the desires and demands of others.

In Freud's account, not only girls' sexual identity but their gender identity is acquired with the Oedipus complex: "With their entry into the [developmentally earlier] phallic phase the differences between the sexes are completely eclipsed by their agreements. We are . . . obliged to recognize that the little girl is a little man" ("F," 22:118). The attainment of gender identity, therefore, is portrayed as a peculiarly female problem, since girls need to turn away from the libidinal activity that is both common to all pre-Oedipal children and distinctively male.<sup>21</sup> In this story female gender identity gets linked both to the question of *origins*, as the gendered self comes into existence in relation to the father, and to *sexual identity*, as that relation is learned through a reorientation of desire. That is, the two forms of self-knowledge, about one's parentage and about one's sexual identity, which Cavell argues are demanded for a (true or happy) marriage, are in Freudian terms conflated in the case of women. On such an account, a woman needs to acknowledge that she came into existence as a female only in relation to the thought of her father's desire for her; that is, she needs to acknowledge him as her one true parent.

The claim of the primacy of paternity has a long history, and Freud is *descriptively* right in associating it with advances in civilization. Aristotle thought that mothers supplied only the matter that semen formed into a human being, and, as Susan Bordo has argued, the seventeenth-century

21. Nancy Chodorow discusses the "primacy of maleness" in Freud's developmental theories, along with a number of challenges to it, in "Freud: Ideology and Evidence," *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1978), pp. 141–58. Chodorow argues that because all children experience an early undifferentiated attachment to a female caretaker, the attainment of gender identity is peculiarly a *male* problem.

*homunculus* theory of reproduction is of a piece with what she calls the Cartesian masculinization of thought.<sup>22</sup> Although it is usually *men* that men are required to be the parents of (since they are the ones who will thereby acquire the authority that comes of being “not of woman born”), there is at least one important example of the paternal parthenogenesis of a daughter: Athena’s emergence from the forehead of Zeus, who became her sole parent by, literally, swallowing her mother. The conditions of Athena’s birth are essential to her role as the goddess of wisdom, as, for example, when in the *Oresteia* she sides with Orestes against the matriarchal Furies, thereby helping to inaugurate patriarchal rule: she declares herself “unreservedly for male in everything / save marrying one.”<sup>23</sup>

The requisite virginity of Athena and of other women—mortal and divine—who play her role of mediating between the worlds of maternal and paternal power (for example, the modern stereotype of the spinster schoolteacher) is, I am beginning to suspect, less a matter of avoiding sex than of avoiding maternity, which, as Cavell points out in a related discussion, used to require (hetero)sexual abstinence (*PH*, p. 59). The difficulties women encounter today when they attempt to combine motherhood and career are rooted in part in their violating a long-standing taboo against combining the symbolically loaded power of maternity with power as constituted in the extradomestic world.<sup>24</sup> To be allowed to exercise that second sort of power, to act like a man, has generally meant thinking of oneself as a genetic fluke—parthenogenetically fathered and sterile.

Cavell’s guess from the region of myth about the absence of heroines’ mothers makes reference to this tradition: “Mythically, the absence of the mother continues the idea that the creation of the woman is the business of men; even, paradoxically, when the creation is that of the so-called new woman, the woman of equality” (*PH*, p. 57). Beyond the obvious paradox, a deeper one appears in the claim that only as fathered can a woman claim *either* public empowerment *or* feminine sexual identity. The paradox lies in the double cultural privileging of paternity—as grounding the authorities of civilization and as creating female desire. The message to a woman is clear: within the systems of male privilege

22. See Susan Bordo, “The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought,” *Signs* 11 (Spring 1986): 439–56. An expanded version of this essay, “The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought and the Seventeenth-Century Flight from the Feminine,” appears in her book, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (Albany, N.Y., 1987), pp. 97–118.

23. Aeschylus, *The Orestes Plays: The Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers, The Eumenides*, trans. Paul Roche (New York, 1962), p. 190.

24. For a discussion of the effects that women’s bearing the sole symbolic power of infant caretakers have on a culture, see Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York, 1976).

neither her appropriately feminine sexual identity nor her ability to assume public power is compatible with her being her mother's daughter. (What is, of course, compatible with her having been mothered is her mothering—one reason why the heroines of these films cannot be mothers. As Nancy Chodorow argues in *The Reproduction of Mothering*, mothers are mothers' daughters.)

It appeared to Freud in his work with adult women that

insight into [the] early, pre-Oedipus, phase in girls comes . . . as a surprise, like the discovery . . . of the Minoan-Mycenean civilization behind the civilization of Greece.

Everything in the sphere of this first attachment to the mother seemed . . . so difficult to grasp in analysis—so grey with age and shadowy and almost impossible to revivify—that it was as if it had succumbed to an especially inexorable repression.

Freud goes on to speculate that his female patients' repression of pre-Oedipal material was reinforced during analysis with him, since the transference would have continued "the very attachment to the father in which they had taken refuge."<sup>25</sup> Women analysts, he suggests, have with more success evoked, *through* the transference, women's attachments to their mothers. One way of thinking about this observation is that heterosexuality both depends on and reinforces the loss of a daughter's attachment to her mother: that attachment is most likely to be rediscovered through an erotically experienced bond with another woman, or through the daughter herself becoming a mother. But in the terrain of these comedies—exclusively heterosexual and childless—the absence of even the memory of a mother is a necessary part of the identity these women embrace.

Consider the one film Cavell discusses in which the heroine does have a mother: *The Philadelphia Story*. When we first see mother and daughter together, a couple of days before Tracy's (second) wedding and just before the arrival of Dexter and the dragooned *Spy* reporters, their relationship is extremely close. We get an intimation, however, that they live that relationship in very different ways. Tracy is affectionately bossy toward her mother (and the others she approves of) and dismissively judgmental toward her father (and the others, notably Dexter, she disapproves of). Her mother is much less severe; even when she strongly disapproves of something, she tends to hold her peace (as when she admits to Dinah that it is "stinking" of Tracy not to allow her father to come to her wedding). Mother Lord's unconditional love, not only of Tracy, but notably of her philandering husband, can be taken, I think, as a model of how Tracy is supposed to learn to feel.

25. Freud, "Female Sexuality," *Standard Edition*, 21:226.

But if Tracy is meant to come to resemble her mother more closely, neither she nor the viewers of the film are meant to attend to that fate in those terms; in particular, neither she nor we are meant to pay much attention to Mother Lord. Rather, Tracy's education, as we are shown it, is entirely in the hands of men, who lecture her on how to be a real woman. (Cavell notes that "Katharine Hepburn seems to inspire her men with the most ungovernable wishes to lecture her. Four of them take turns at it in *The Philadelphia Story*" [*PH*, p. 56].) Tracy's mother's role in her daughter's education is precisely to allow herself to be replaced, to be silent in the face of the paternal claim.

Feminist critics of the Shakespearean romances that Cavell finds echoed in these films—notably *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in *The Philadelphia Story*—have argued that the marriages that constitute their happy endings are an assertion of patriarchal order that requires the rupture of bonds between women.<sup>26</sup> Since comedic heroines seem in general never to have had mothers, the mother/daughter bond is not usually among those whose rupture is enacted, but I think we can see its fate in *The Philadelphia Story* as emblematic of the long-buried prehistory to which Freud consigns a girl's pre-Oedipal attachment to her mother.

The scene in which Tracy's father asserts his claim to her affectionate attention contains, as Cavell notes, "words difficult to tolerate" (*PH*, p. 137), especially as we know them to be overheard by Mrs. Lord: they are simply and unredeemably cruel. Mr. Lord makes it clear that he considers his behavior none of his daughter's business, that far from occupying the high moral ground she takes herself to be on, she's "been speaking like a jealous woman," and, finally, that if he's been involved with another woman, it's *her* fault. The reason he gives for this accusation (one that I fear the film does not expect us to find outrageous) is that a man has a natural need—and, apparently, consequently a right—to be looked up to uncritically by a beautiful young woman, so if his daughter refuses to meet this need once her mother is no longer young and beautiful, she is guilty of his seeking to have it met elsewhere. It is, in Cavell's words, "essential to his aria that it occurs *in the presence of the mother*, as a kind of reclaiming of her from Tracy" (*PH*, p. 137). But it is equally and, for the narrative, more importantly a claiming of Tracy from her mother, an assertion of his claim to her love and attention. And Tracy goes on, oblivious to the effect of her father's words on her mother (it is not clear that she knows her to have been listening), to test what he has said against how the other men around her see her and how she wants to see herself and to be seen.

26. For a discussion of that rupture in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, see Shirley Nelson Garner, "A *Midsummer Night's Dream*: 'Jack shall have Jill / Nought shall go ill,'" *Women's Studies* 9 (1981): 47–63.

Cavell's discussion of the rupture between Tracy and her mother that follows this speech ("there is next to no further exchange between them in the film" [*PH*, p. 138]) connects it to Freud's discussion of women's unhappy first marriages in "Female Sexuality," but the connection is an odd one. Freud suggests that a woman's difficult marriage may be replicating a difficult relationship with her mother, but the film gives us no reason to attribute any particular difficulty to Tracy's relationship with her mother. Her bossiness seems to *manifest* itself in relation to her mother rather than to be a peculiar feature of that relationship or particularly grounded in it.

What the film *does* seem to be telling us, particularly in conjunction with the others in its genre and with the tradition of romantic comedy in general, is that a woman's happiness in marriage requires her abandonment both of her love for her mother and of the active aspects of her own sexuality. She needs to acknowledge her identity as a sexually desiring woman, and even to act in pursuit of those desires, but the structure of desire she needs to acknowledge is Oedipal. The right man is the one who, because of the nature of *his* desire for *her*, has a claim on her. In their unsuccessful attempts to escape the claims of the right man, the heroines of *The Awful Truth* and *His Girl Friday* turn, like Tracy Lord, to unsuitable substitutes, men who lack the power to make such a claim to a woman's desire, because they have not learned to turn their desire away from their mothers.

Thus, it seems to me that by exploring the regions of Cavell's guesses about the absence of the heroines' mothers in these films, I can adequately account for the absence, but the cost of the account is a serious compromising of the pleasure I can take in those films and of my ability to regard their endings as happy ones. Cavell is right to note that in these films "the creation of the woman is the business of men" (*PH*, p. 57): that this creation requires for its fictional enactment the erasure of the woman's mother confirms feminist suspicions that, like Athena from Zeus' forehead, women born of men will identify with them and will at best leave a dubious legacy of female self-realization.

### *Missing Mothers/Desiring Daughters: Take Two*

Remind me how we loved our mother's body  
our bodies drawing the first  
thin sweetness from her nipples

our faces dreaming hour on hour  
in the salt smell of her lap    Remind me  
how her touch melted childgrief

how she floated great and tender in our dark  
or stood guard over us  
against our willing

and how we thought she loved  
the strange male body first  
that took, that took, whose taking seemed a law

and how she sent us weeping  
into that law  
how we remet her in our childbirth visions

erect, enthroned, above  
a spiral stair  
and crawled and panted toward her

I know, I remember, but  
hold me, remind me  
of how her woman's flesh was made taboo to us  
—Adrienne Rich, "Sibling Mysteries"

In the previous section mothers were missing and daughters were desired. Shifting the syntax, in this section mothers are missed, even if physically present, and daughters—problematically—desire. Along with much other feminist poetry, fiction, and theory, Adrienne Rich's poetry and prose challenge the Freudian framework, evident both in the films Cavell discusses and in his discussion of them, which constructs both female desire and female gender identity in a girl's Oedipal relation to her father. Along with feminist object-relations theorists, Rich situates gender identity pre-Oedipally; she is more explicit than they tend to be in situating the learning of specifically female desire there as well. She has criticized the heterosexism that underlies attempts to theorize female heterosexuality as the endpoint of a natural developmental path.<sup>27</sup> She can help us to see how *unnatural* it is to turn our gaze away, as boys and men are never expected to, from the female body, which is, in a society that places early child-rearing nearly exclusively in the hands of women, the source of our knowledge of love and intimacy. We may also see how unnatural it is to turn *toward* the bodies of those who are taught that our place in the world is to serve their needs and desires, and to name those needs and desires as our own.

In a discussion of *La Princesse de Clèves* Marianne Hirsch argues that Mme de Chartres offers her daughter an alternative to the inevitable dangers of a life of heterosexual passion: "she wants to teach her daughter not only to survive but to transcend, and, to do so, she does give her a form of power, although it is a negative one. It is the power of absence,

27. See Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence."



abstinence and denial, the strength to remain equal by saying 'no.'"<sup>28</sup> Mme de Clèves needs to say "no" not only to the Duc de Nemours but, most important, to her own passionate desires, as they are evoked within a context of female vulnerability to male power. To succumb to her desire is not just to make herself vulnerable to abandonment and disgrace, but, more deeply, to structure her self around a willed renunciation of autonomy. Ironically, however, as Hirsch argues, the alternative her mother offers is one that denies precisely the possibility of autonomy, resting as it does on a continuing dependency on Mme de Chartres or on her chosen successor, the Prince de Clèves. Hirsch concludes, "As feminist readers engaged in an act of re-vision, we see the strength in the Princess' uncompromised withdrawal, we see the victory of her refusal to be the female object in the exchange of love, of her insistence on attachment and continuity. Yet we cannot help but question the unbridgeable oppositions which prevent her from growing up."<sup>29</sup>

A number of films have played out versions of the tension between a woman's attachment to her mother and the demands of heterosexual love. Three pictures of this tension are drawn, from rather different angles, in *Now, Voyager*, *Bill of Divorcement*, and *Mildred Pierce*. The first two films are melodramas, and *Mildred Pierce* is a melodrama framed by a *film noir*.<sup>30</sup> In his essay "Psychoanalysis and Cinema," Cavell discusses melodrama as that genre that confronts the threats and dangers lurking in the cracks of the comedies, and he explicitly joins that discussion to the issue of women whose creation cannot be in the hands of men, whose identity is discovered elsewhere than in heterosexual love and marriage. The mother/daughter connection is the most fundamental of those elsewhere.

As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith argues, melodrama is quintessentially familial, its family is patriarchal, and it addresses "the problems of adults, particularly women, in relation to their sexuality" and "the child's problems of growing into a sexual identity within the family, under the aegis of a symbolic law which the father incarnates." While I agree that patriarchal power structures the familial world of melodrama, Nowell-Smith's emphasis slights the presence and dramatic importance of mothers, which is one of the distinguishing marks of the genre. For example, *Mildred Pierce* is as good an example as one could find of his claim that "melodrama enacts, often with uncanny literalness, the 'family romance' described by Freud—that is to say, the imaginary scenario played out by children in relation to their paternity, the asking and answering of the question,

28. Marianne Hirsch, "A Mother's Discourse: Incorporation and Repetition in *La Princesse de Clèves*," *Yale French Studies* 62 (1981): 85.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

30. See Pam Cook, "Duplicity in *Mildred Pierce*," in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. Kaplan, rev. ed. (London, 1980), p. 71; hereafter abbreviated "D."

whose child am I (or would I like to be)?”<sup>31</sup> But it is essential to Veda’s attempt to discover herself as Monty’s daughter, as it is to her subsequent attempt to become “incestuously” involved with him, that he is her mother’s lover: a Mildred who is married to Monty would be someone she could, as she desperately needs to, acknowledge as her mother. (That this need is profoundly ambivalent does not, of course, make it less significant to the film.)

The story Mildred tells is a mother’s story. Feminist critics have discussed the framing of her story by the detective(s) story (“D,” p. 71), but equally noteworthy is Veda’s attempt, internal to Mildred’s story, to frame it in a way that will play out her family romance. Veda’s attachment to Mildred is strong, and Bert is represented as weak and emotionally absent. (His affair with Mrs. Biedermeier seems to be justified in the eyes of the film by Mildred’s “infidelity” in putting the children, particularly Veda, first.) Veda’s desire to recast the facts of her own origins therefore centers on Mildred, who comes to be the target of Veda’s rage when those fantasies are unfulfilled. What Veda demands from Mildred is not only the presence of money and social connection but also the absence of those things—notably, housework and working-class labor—that have no place in the sort of privileged narrative to which she wants her life to conform.

Veda has the opportunity to leave Mildred and to live a life of social and economic privilege, but she uses her marriage for extortion instead. Though Veda explicitly says she wants the money in order to leave Mildred, her actions make it hard to believe that she really means this, except as an expression of enraged disappointment—an exaggeration of the reaction Freud attributes to all daughters in the face of the discovery of the limitations of their mothers’ power. Instead of turning to her father at this point, Veda rebelliously “makes a spectacle” of herself, becoming not the appropriately gazed-at object of paternal and then husbandly love, but a showgirl leered at by sailors, until Mildred succumbs to Veda’s fantasy and marries Monty. Having had her fantasy family put in place, Veda takes to playing out the Oedipal story with the father she chose. But the available cultural scripts make the incest taboo inoperative and the misinterpretation of Veda’s desire—by Veda herself and by Monty—inevitable, and fatal: at the moment of Veda’s taking her desire for Monty to be a desire to take him away from Mildred, she kills him, and turns for her life back to Mildred, who cannot, this time, save her.

*Mildred Pierce* is in part about what becomes of motherhood when mothers lack the power to fulfill their children’s dreams but are still held, by their children and by themselves, responsible for that failure. The Oedipus complex is supposed to teach both girls and boys that mothers

31. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, “Minnelli and Melodrama,” *Screen* 18 (Summer 1977): 113–18; reprinted in *Movies and Methods*, 2:193.

don't have this power, that boys have it themselves and that girls are to get it from men. One of its normative results is the weakening of maternal—and, more generally, female—power. In *Mildred Pierce*, neither Veda nor Mildred has come to terms with this cultural demand, and they are both punished for their refusal. At the very end Mildred is “redeemed” by the power of the law, which, knowing the truth of her innocence and Veda's guilt, releases her, as it were, into Bert's protective custody, while Veda is left behind, believing that Mildred has betrayed her. The betrayal may be illusory, but the severing of the bond between them, as the price for Mildred's return to the social order, is not. As Pam Cook points out, the film reminds us “of what women must give up for the sake of the patriarchal order”: the closing shot of Mildred and Bert leaving the police station also frames two women on their knees, scrubbing the floor.<sup>32</sup>

Cook's essay places *Mildred Pierce* in the context of J. J. Bachofen's theory of “the violent overthrow of mother-right in favor of father-right” (“D,” p. 69), the same transformation that Freud discusses in *Moses and Monotheism* that needs to be accomplished intrapsychically through the “successful” resolution of the Oedipal crisis. In the case of girls, the resolution of the crisis is oddly located at its inauguration, at the shift of attachment from mother to father. As hostile as Veda is to Mildred throughout the film, the root of both her rage and her rebelliousness is her refusal to make this shift, her continuing insistence on Mildred's power. Veda's desires are transgressive because they continue to have as their ultimate object the phallic mother, whose castration is demanded by the patriarchal order. Unlike Mother Lord, Mildred is unwilling to enact her own disempowerment. When the force of the law finally subdues her, it is too late for her daughters: one is dead and one is imprisoned for murder. The film closes, grimly, as a dark reflection of the remarriage comedies: Mildred walks off, reunited with her first husband, framed within a childless marriage.

In many ways *Now, Voyager* is a mirror image of *Mildred Pierce*. Bette Davis as Charlotte Vale is trapped by her mother's imperious refusal to let her go and by the repressions that refusal has demanded and instilled. Unlike the *Princesse de Clèves*, Charlotte does not obediently accept her mother's picture of the world of heterosexual desire as lethally dangerous. Though she lives a life of renunciation of desire, it is with an undercurrent of stifled rebellion, played out—with obvious Freudian symbolism—in the hidden boxes she makes and the forbidden cigarettes she smokes. In this explicitly psychoanalytic version of the incompatibility of mother/daughter attachment and heterosexual desire, therapy is called on to undermine the attachment and liberate the desire. But, in the terms of the film, the results are ambiguous. Charlotte does acknowledge and

32. See “D,” p. 81, and Joyce Nelson, “*Mildred Pierce* Reconsidered,” *Film Reader* 2 (1977); reprinted in *Movies and Methods*, 2:457.

express desire, but the terms of the acknowledgment and expression are given by the men in her life, and in the end she represses her desire for Jerry in favor of a maternal connection to his daughter.

Lea Jacobs argues that Dr. Jacquith's role is "outside desire, identified with the process of narrative itself": he makes it possible for Charlotte to have a story.<sup>33</sup> But the story she has is one in which her desire is expressed as her desirability, a framing that she continually resists, as Jacobs demonstrates through the close analysis of shots in which Charlotte attempts either to place herself at the site of enunciation or to resist being the visibly fetishized object of desire. Neither of these attempts is wholly successful, but her persistence undermines her recuperation into the system of desire defined by the narrative into which Dr. Jacquith's cure is supposed to insert her. Instead of taking her place as an object of heterosexual desire, she takes *his* place as an asexual substitute parent to Tina. Though we are supposed to see her as liberated from the static, prenarrative maternal realm, she chooses at the end to remove herself from the story. Her final gesture can be read as sacrificial of her happiness for Tina's, but it can equally, and subversively, be seen as a refusal of the terms on which she was offered an entry into narrative—a positioning as the object of the male gaze and a renunciation of maternity.

What is clear is that Charlotte cannot have both a consummated heterosexual relationship and an ongoing maternal one. As she tells Jerry at the close of the film, Dr. Jacquith has let her keep Tina "on probation," and Jerry's visit is a test of her will to renounce her sexual desires in favor of her maternal ones. Dr. Jacquith's initial "cure" of Charlotte was his positioning her as an object of heterosexual desire. (Like a proper father, he refrained from actively desiring her himself, but functioned as a catalyst around which her desire to be desired crystallized.) In the face of her resistance to being so positioned, he agreed to shift his definition of healthy adulthood for her, but he retained the power to keep sexuality and maternity separate—and to define them both.

The mothering Charlotte embraces at the end is a replication of what Dr. Jacquith provided for her; it hardly provides a point of connection to her own mother, who, like Tina's mother, Isobel, continues to be that from which daughters need to be helped to escape. Jeanne Thomas Allen, editor of the screenplay of *Now, Voyager*, notes that Edmund Goulding's treatment of Olive Higgins Prouty's novel "begins the process of 'strengthening' the male figures as father-doctors in Charlotte's rebirth, while the roles of Charlotte's sister-in-law, Lisa, and friend, Deb, are minimized. The psychological midwives of the novel are replaced by doctors, who turn the midwives into nurses."<sup>34</sup> Thus, there is a deep

33. Lea Jacobs, "Now, Voyager: Some Problems of Enunciation and Sexual Difference," *Camera Obscura* 7 (Spring 1981): 94.

34. Jeanne Thomas Allen, "Introduction: *Now, Voyager* as Women's Film: Coming of Age Hollywood Style," in *Now, Voyager*, ed. Allen, Wisconsin/Warner Bros. Screenplay Series (Madison, Wis., 1984), p. 20.

instability in the film, not only between the demands of maternity and of heterosexual desire, but, internal to each of those demands, about the locus of defining authority. As Jacobs argues, "it is not that *Now, Voyager* openly subverts the conventions of romantic love but rather that in examining a woman's place within those conventions the narrative, even the film's syntax, becomes deformed. The question of how, and through whom, Charlotte Vale's desire will express itself engenders a dizzying chain of displacement and counter-displacement which never comes to rest."<sup>35</sup>

Another playing out of the tension between the mother/daughter relationship and heterosexual desire occurs in *Bill of Divorcement*, this time with an extremely odd twist. As the film opens, Sydney (Katharine Hepburn) and her mother, Margaret (Billie Burke), are each happily in love and about to marry. The only shadow over their happiness is the father/husband Sydney never knew and Margaret wishes to forget. Hilary (John Barrymore) has been hospitalized for what turns out to be "hereditary insanity," and his return, he hopes to his wife's love, threatens the happiness of the impending marriages. Most obviously, of course, it threatens *Margaret's* marriage. Even though she has obtained a divorce, she is as moved by the force of her ex-husband's love and need for her as she was when she married him, and her own love for another seems as without force now as her lack of love for Hilary did then. It seems to her that she has no choice but to renounce the man she loves to resume a marriage defined by another man's weakness and intense need of her.

Hilary, however, mistook Sydney for her mother when he first unexpectedly turned up: she is, both in appearance and in manner, more like the wife he lost. She is, he says, softer, kinder, more loving than her mother has become; she is also, not altogether coherently, more like *him*. (The androgyny of both their names is further sign of their identification.) The combination forces *Sydney* to be the one whose marriage plans dissolve in the face of her father's return. She is the one, she says, who understands him and can make him happy, the one he really loves, and the one who bears the hereditary taint of insanity, hence the one who doesn't dare have children. She sends away both her lover and her mother—she literally hands her mother into the arms of a new husband—and settles down at the piano with her father, willingly accepting her fate to live with and care for a man she saw for the first time the day before, but to whom she immediately feels more connected than she does to her mother or her fiancé.

The father/daughter bond in *Bill of Divorcement* is hardly conducive, as it is in the remarriage comedies, to the daughter's acknowledgment of sexual desire and her subsequent marital happiness. What we are explicitly told is that it is precisely *because* she is her father's daughter that Sydney has to forego marriage: she can neither leave him nor take

35. Jacobs, "Now, Voyager," p. 103.

the risk of bearing children, and the possibility of her going mad, as he did, is too much to expect her lover to bear (as she thinks her father's madness is too much to expect her mother to bear). The film plays out too literally the fantasy of paternal parthenogenesis: Sydney seems to take her father instinctively as her true parent and to experience the bond with him as nonfungible.

The presence of her father and the knowledge of what it means to be his daughter transform Sydney's experience of her own desire. No longer is that desire compatible, as it clearly was at the start of the film, with continued intimacy with her mother or with the desire to have children. The placement of her father at the point of definition of her identity and her desire precludes both Sydney's continued closeness to her mother and the possibility of her own motherhood. We may not notice how, in the comedies, the daughter's marriage is made possible by the invisibility of her mother, but when the roles are reversed and a *daughter* retreats into the static space outside of narrative to enable her *mother's* romantic marriage, the underlying logic becomes disconcertingly clear.<sup>36</sup>

In the terms of this film, it is not the closeness of the mother/daughter bond that is incompatible with the daughter's heterosexual desire and happy marriage, but how that bond is experienced under the law of the father, and the connection between heterosexuality and male power, the connection Rich's poem draws so vividly. The consequences of Sydney's acknowledgment of her father highlight the peremptory violence of the claim of father-right, the violence a daughter needs to ignore in the name of "normal" heterosexual development. The violence that is done to the relationship between mothers and daughters—either its total erasure, as in most romantic comedies, or the painful ruptures or sacrifices characteristic of melodrama—has its roots not simply in the daughter's need to learn to love someone else. The violence is grounded in the way in which patriarchy demands that she learn that lesson—as a submission to male power, first in the person of her father, and as a renunciation of her belief in her mother's power and her hope for her own.

One of the messages of the maternal melodrama concerns the difficulty women encounter in denying the power and primacy of their connection to their mothers, a denial deemed essential for the development of "normal" female heterosexuality under the conditions of patriarchy. This difficulty, and the pain mothers and daughters experience through the teaching

36. Ruth Wood has pointed out to me the significance of the daughter's taking on the maternal role in order to liberate her mother from it, so that the mother may enter the realm of romantic narrative. Not only does that role need to be filled by *someone*, but it can appear positively more attractive and less confining than those associated with romance, as it did to Charlotte Vale. On a daughter's need to "rescue" her mother, see Jane Flax, "Mother-Daughter Relationships: Psychodynamics, Politics, and Philosophy," in *The Future of Difference*, ed. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (Boston and New York, 1980), p. 35.

and learning of female powerlessness, are the dark underside of the laughter of the remarriage comedies. As in Shakespeare's romantic comedies, the achievement of the happy ending of marriage requires the severing of bonds between women.<sup>37</sup> The pleasure many women, myself included, take in such comedies, and in their bright, bold, sexually assertive heroines, is bought at the cost of not noticing what has become of their mothers and how their very brightness is figured as eager identification with a male-defined world, a world to which their fathers hold the key.

### *Framing the Sight of Women*

The gaze is not necessarily male (literally), but to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the "masculine" position.

—E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film*

With *Stella Dallas*, we begin to see why the Mother has so rarely occupied the center of the narrative: For how can the *spectator* be subject, at least in the sense of controlling the action?

—E. Ann Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother"

To say that we wish to view the world itself is to say that we are wishing for the condition of viewing as such. That is our way of establishing our connection with the world: through viewing it, or having views of it. Our condition has become one in which our natural mode of perception is to view, feeling unseen. We do not so much look at the world as look *out at* it, from behind the self.

—Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*

Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.

—Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Do women as women see, or must we become "masculine" to own the gaze? Is the position of the viewer one of power or one of passivity? In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey argues, with respect to cinematic gazes—the gaze of the characters within the film, the gaze of the camera, and the gaze of the spectators at the film—that their structures are those of masculine desire. In her analysis, the nature of this desire and the anxieties associated with it require the diversion of attention from the camera's and the spectators' gazes, through the creation and maintenance of "an illusion of Renaissance space . . . ; the camera's

37. See Garner, "A *Midsummer Night's Dream*."

look [along with the look of the audience] is disavowed in order to create a convincing world in which the spectator's surrogate [the male character with whom the male viewer identifies] can perform with verisimilitude."<sup>38</sup>

Christian Metz makes a similar point, although problematically without attention to gender specificity,<sup>39</sup> in distinguishing (in Emile Beneveniste's terms) between the naturalistic, gapless *story* the film presents and the *discourse* that is its telling. For Metz, narrative film gratifies a desire to be "a pure, all-seeing and invisible subject, the vanishing point of the monocular perspective which cinema has taken over from painting."<sup>40</sup> Such a perspective is meant to be one from which the world appears as it really is, the privileged point at which the perfect Cartesian knower situates himself.<sup>41</sup> Such pure subjectivity presumes a world of equally pure objectivity, a world that is both wholly independent and essentially visible. In Metz's terms, "the *seen* is all thrust back on to the pure object, the paradoxical object which derives its peculiar force from this act of confinement."<sup>42</sup>

Attention to the role of gender in the construction and articulation of specular desire reveals this fantasy as the self-contradictory fantasy of pornography: the essence of the woman is her desire, knowable only to the man, to be seduced/raped. The contradiction comes in the demand for this desire, as her essence, to exist independently of him—he is not responsible for it—but to be at the same time wholly exhausted by his ability to evoke and satisfy it. (This fantasy is related, of course, to the Freudian fantasy, discussed above, of the paternal parthenogenesis of feminine desire.) Such a fantasy, of an object of knowledge both wholly independent and wholly knowable, and the problems caused by the impossibility of its satisfaction are at the heart of epistemic modernity. Nature as "she" is required both to be absolutely independent of the knowing subject (as he acquires his authority by his hard-won independence from *her*) and to be fully revealed by his penetration. The irresolvable tension between these two demands gives rise to skepticism.

The conditions of vision and of visibility have figured centrally in epistemology since the Greeks.<sup>43</sup> Those conditions underwent a trans-

38. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 2:314.

39. See *AD*, pp. 24–26, 78–79, and 144–46.

40. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington, Ind., 1982), p. 97.

41. In reference to the bearer of epistemic authority in modern Western culture, the masculine pronoun is accurate and nongeneric. As in theories about the gaze, a problem for the feminist epistemologist is to account for how women have appropriated and can appropriate this authority—in particular by exploring the possibilities for going beyond claiming the individual right to "think like men" to challenging the normative maleness of authoritative ways of knowing.

42. Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, p. 97.

43. For a discussion of the historical shifts in the epistemology of vision with particular attention to gender, see Keller and Christine R. Grontkowski, "The Mind's Eye," in *Discovering Reality*, pp. 207–24.



formation, starting in the Renaissance, as the definitions of epistemic authority shifted. Such authority gradually came to be framed not in terms of an omniscient, omnipresent deity, for whom distance was irrelevant, nor in the embodied terms of an engaged practitioner, who moved among and interacted with the objects of knowledge.<sup>44</sup> Rather, epistemic authority was ceded to those who stood at the proper distance from the objects of knowledge and who had achieved the proper degree of independence from them—and from their own contingent “limitations” and “biases.” The modern scientist, who has been our culture’s epistemic hero, achieves this status by reliably accomplishing the normatively male tasks of separation and empowerment based on dissociation from everything maternal and, by extension, everything female.<sup>45</sup> The male Oedipal narrative has become the template for the processes that authorize vision and whose fantasized, effortless achievement provides (one form of) cinematic pleasure.

Cavell’s account of the peculiar pleasures of movies similarly takes as definitive the wish, referred to in the third epigraph to this section, to be an unviewed viewer of the world. Cavell’s account of this wish seems, however, more innocent and less political. As in his discussion throughout *The Claim of Reason* of related issues concerning the troubling of our epistemic relations to each other and to the rest of the world, both our desires and the blocks to their gratification are given as *ours*—all of ours, as inhabitants of the modern, Western world, sharers of a particular culture. For Cavell, what cinema grants us is not meant to be the power of the pornographer but respite from our complicity in the structuring of the world, “not a wish for power over creation . . . , but a wish not to need power, not to have to bear its burdens.”<sup>46</sup> The wish is granted by the total presentness to us of the world on the screen without our being present to it, neither implicated in it nor limited in our view of it by our particular placement in it.

44. See Samuel Y. Edgerton, Jr., *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective* (New York, 1975), pp. 20–21.

45. In “The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought,” Bordo explicitly identifies the medieval European world with the maternal and takes the attainment of epistemic modernity to consist largely in an explicit separation from a symbiotic union of the self with the (maternal) cosmos (pp. 451–56). I am dubious about that identification: the power challenged by the rise of bourgeois epistemology was in fact nearly exclusively in the hands of men—the authorities of the Church and of a hereditary aristocracy. In a variety of complex ways, women (most notably those who were condemned as witches) and the symbolically feminine were scapegoated as the locus of archaic claims to epistemic authority and transformed into the prototypes of the objects of knowledge, control, and exploitation (Mother Nature). It is, in general, a risky business for feminists to identify images of women’s power in some long lost time and place as authentically female, since such images are often, as much as anything else, misogynist creations used to justify the allegedly liberating nature of male power, as in the *Oresteia*.

46. Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), p. 40.

The innocence of this wish is, I think, misleading. The wish to be an unseen seer may be a wish for a less troubled relation to reality, but that relation has been troubled in large measure by the cultural placement of epistemic authority precisely in the eyes of an unseen seer: movies grant us the opportunity not to notice the extent to which we are supposed to work at pushing the world away to view it truly. The world of the scientist doesn't contain the scientist, but his absence from it is neither innocent nor effortless. Thus, what Iago offers Othello is meant to be access to Desdemona's world as it is in itself, but what Othello gets is the view of a spy, of someone who by his own efforts is hidden from the world he views, seeing not Desdemona-in-herself but Desdemona-as-spied-upon.<sup>47</sup> Kant may have tried to tell us that the world is always our world, but we haven't really learned it, and we go on trying to spy on it: no wonder we are lured by the promise of a world we don't have to hide behind a curtain to see. (We see it, in fact, when the curtain is pulled aside.)

The "we" in the last paragraph is, of course, problematic, obscuring as it does questions about whose world it is and whose view of it is authorized, or troubled by the terms of that authority. Feminist film criticism has taken as a major task the theorizing of the gender specificities of the desires, among them epistemic, that cinema gratifies, as feminist philosophy has taken as one of *its* major tasks the theorizing of the gender specificities of epistemic desires, among them visual. The analysis of the desire to know, in a culture that construes knowledge in primarily visual terms, is inseparable from the analysis of the construction of visual desire and of visual pleasure, which is in turn inseparable from the analysis of the construction of gender.

It is in this light that we need to think about the characterization of the cinematic gaze(s) as male. As Teresa de Lauretis argues, "The project of feminist cinema . . . is not so much 'to make visible the invisible,' as the saying goes, or to destroy vision altogether, as to construct another (object of) vision and the conditions of visibility for a different social subject" (*AD*, pp. 67–68). This is, I would say, a feminist project quite generally: to create the conditions for a transformed subject/object relation, in part by attending to, and redrawing, the lines of sight. The revolutions of the Renaissance and the subsequent rise of science, capitalism, and the modern state created the conditions for the existence and hegemonic power of the unitary subject, based on its separation from and domination

47. See Naomi Scheman, "Othello's Doubt/Desdemona's Death: The Engendering of Scepticism," in *Power/Gender/Values*, ed. Judith Genova (Calgary, 1987), pp. 113–33. In this essay, I discuss Othello as enacting the paranoia that underlies modern Western epistemology. My discussion is a response to Cavell's use of Othello to illuminate the origins of skepticism in the position of the modern knower (gender unspecified) in *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford and New York, 1979), pp. 481–96.

over the object of knowledge. The revolutions of the objectified others (women and members of other oppressed and colonized groups—all those who have been scrutinized, stared at, anatomized, and ogled without being authorized to return the gaze or to see each other) will entail another transformation in what it is to know or to be known or knowable.

The lack of authority in women's looking is not, however, reason to conclude that we do not see, nor even that patriarchy does not allow or require that we see. The absence of the female gaze in some feminist theorizing is problematic, not only because such theories leave out of account significant features of the workings of masculinist power, but also because the looking that we do is a good place to seek out cracks in that power, even when we look as dutiful daughters and self-sacrificing mothers (as Tracy Lord or Stella Dallas).

In her essay "To Be and Be Seen: The Politics of Reality," Marilyn Frye explores both the (con)scripting of female vision and the liberating cracks it opens up.<sup>48</sup> Starting from her own view of the world as a lesbian, she is struck by the perception that women in general, and lesbian women in particular, are *not* seen by patriarchal eyes, whether those be the eyes of men or the eyes of women who see as men would have them see—as Virginia Woolf's enlarging mirrors.<sup>49</sup> Such eyes see the activities of men, against an invisible background of the enabling activities of women. In such a world, lesbian women are conceptually impossible: the positions by which women are defined are implicitly or explicitly heterosexual, and lesbians, Frye argues, are defined by their seeing of women, by the fact that women draw and hold their attention. But such attention is ontologically inadmissible; the illusion must be maintained that there is nothing there to look at: "The maintenance of phallocratic reality requires that the attention of women be focused on men and men's projects—the play; and that attention not be focused on women—the stagehands. Woman-loving, as a spontaneous and habitual orientation of attention is then, both directly and indirectly, inimical to the maintenance of that reality" (*PR*, p. 172).

Mr. Lord's demand of Tracy in *The Philadelphia Story*, that she learn to look at men in the proper way, is a demand that she reorient her attention and with it her sense of herself in the world. The attention she gives to Mike, when she goes to the library to read his book, is a sign to him and to us that she is capable of this learning, of becoming what she and we are told is a "real woman." Conversely, Mildred and Veda are doomed because they refuse to learn this; they can't take their eyes off each other. At the end Mildred is "saved" by having the authority of vision taken away from her: the story is no longer her melodrama, but the detective's *film noir*, and in that story she is the "redeemed" woman,

48. See *PR*, pp. 152–74.

49. See Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York, 1929), p. 60.

marked off from Veda, who is given that genre's other female role, as "damned." As Mother Lord's and Charlotte Vale's fates illustrate, a mother may sometimes go on gazing at her daughter, provided that she remove herself from narrative space and consent by her silence to her daughter's incorporation into the realm of the fathers.<sup>50</sup>

In a study of the relationships between power and the lines of sight, Michel Foucault marks modernity in part by the directing of vision toward the subjugated, a characterization that makes the normative orientation of female vision toward men anachronistic. The modern gaze for Foucault is directed not at the powerful (who in premodern Europe had been the focal point of attention, their power figured as visual splendor) but toward the legions of the disciplined, kept in line by a diffuse, anonymous, institutionalized, and internalized system of surveillance.<sup>51</sup> Foucault's model of the sight lines of modernity fits the ways in which women are subject to the tyranny of the actual and internalized male gaze, including what Sandra Bartky has called, with reference to Foucault, the "discipline of femininity."<sup>52</sup> Female subjugation operates largely through such a disciplinary system, through our being seen and seeing ourselves as certain sorts of visual objects. But the directionality of conscripted daughterly and maternal vision does not fit this model. It runs in the wrong direction; it picks out its object as visibly distinguished and as powerful *because* visibly distinguished.

Part of the placement of such anachronistically structured female subordination in the modern world is achieved by the framing of women's vision by diffuse masculine power: neither the attentive mothers nor the adoring daughters are unseen, and they do not acquire the power that accrues to the unseen seers. Mothers, for example, are the objects of the social-scientific gaze, which judges the adequacy of their mothering from behind the two-way mirror in the psychologist's playroom. The maternal gaze is not unobserved and, although it can certainly be felt as powerful by those who are its objects, it is itself closely watched to ensure that actual empowerment flows from and not to it. Similarly, the daughter who looks up first to her father and then to his surrogate is herself the specular object of his defining desire.

The specular economy of patriarchy does not define women as exclusively either the seers or the seen. Rather, we are expected to be both, sometimes simultaneously: our subordination comes in the subtle directing of the allowable lines of sight. And it is along those lines that we can look for cracks, since they are the sites of tension. Frye's account, in "In

50. See Kaplan, "The Case of the Missing Mother," pp. 82–85.

51. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977).

52. See Sandra Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," in *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, ed. Lee Quinby and Irene Diamond (Boston, 1988).

and Out of Harm's Way: Arrogance and Love," of the tension between exploitation, which requires the activity of the exploited, and oppression, which would obliterate the possibility of that activity, is illuminating here.<sup>53</sup> Culturally normative male arrogance demands that women look, but, as Frye argues, the maintenance of phallocratic reality requires that we not be the authors of what we see (*PR*, pp. 165–66). We also are to be seen, but only as the beautiful objects we can make ourselves up to resemble.

Central to the resolution of the tension between these demands—between vision and blindness and between visibility and camouflage—has been the separation of women from each other: the seers must not see the seen. In particular, the happy expression of female desire, a goal of the remarriage comedies, requires the heroine never to have known—or thoroughly to forget—that it was in a woman's eyes that she was born as female and there that she first learned desire. The women in the melodramas, who in various ways possess this knowledge, are punished for it, for their inability to keep the domains of maternity and sexuality cordoned off. They need to be taught, like Charlotte Vale, that whatever power we have is had "on probation."

It is by "reading against the grain" of these injunctions that we can begin to "construct another (object of) vision and the conditions of visibility for a different social subject" (*AD*, p. 68). We need to remember that we did not come into existence—as subject, as female, or as desiring—in Oedipal relation to our fathers. When Mulvey suggests that the gaze is available to us because we have access to our pre-Oedipal masculinity, she colludes with Freud's heterosexist erasure of the mother/daughter relationship.<sup>54</sup> I have been arguing that, even for looking at classical Hollywood cinema, there is another gaze, which is not inscribed in the film or in the terms of its address but discoverable in the cracks along the lines of sight. Such a gaze may be untheorizable, but that may be in part because of the constraints of theory. We may need to look in the untheorizable gaps—such as those generated by the tension Frye describes between exploitation and oppression or between the impossibility and the actuality of lesbian desire—for examples of the activity of resistance, and learn from them without having or needing a theory that tells us how or whom we ought to see.

53. See *PR*, pp. 52–94.

54. See Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,'" p. 13.