Wicked Women:
The Menace Lurking Behind Female Independence

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Abstract:
Female independence has traditionally been perceived as a menace for the order established by patriarchal society. Even in our days, a woman who decides not to adapt herself to the traditional roles established for her - freely rejecting, for instance, marriage or maternity - is seen in some quarters as a weird specimen going against what nature has intended for her. In popular representations of the collective imagination, this female independence often takes the form of wicked, evil women who sometimes are the worst enemies to their own gender. The aim of this chapter is to have a look at the ways these female stereotypes have been portrayed in literature and films. Cinderella’s stepmother or the Marquise of Merteuil in Stephen Frears’ adaptation of Laclos’s Les Liaisons Dangereuses, are some of a multitude of instances found in discourses taken from different media portraying women abused for refusing to yield submissively to the image of virtue dictated by the established social order.

Keywords: Cinderella; Female wickedness; fairy tales; Dangerous Liaisons; Lucrezia Borgia; Heathers; Mean Girls; patriarchal order; Snow White.

If asked to give a name of an evil female character of history, the name of Lucrezia Borgia would almost automatically spring to most people’s minds. The illegitimate daughter of an ambitious pope and sister of one of the cruellest characters of the Italian Rinascimento, Lucrezia brings to the already dark Borgia surname associations of licentious, surreptitious and menacingly evil female behaviour, which have transformed her into a monster.

In a recent biography on this famous woman, Sarah Bradford attempts to set the record straight by exposing to what extent five centuries of male chroniclers have contributed to swell up the myth of “the greatest whore Rome ever had”. In Bradford’s account, Lucrezia appears as a survivor who managed to take the reins of her own life, making her way through a male-controlled world dominated by wars and constant conspiracies. Worse crimes seem to be most easily condoned if perpetrated by a man - after all, Lucrezia’s brother, the ferocious Cesare Borgia, was Machiavelli’s most admired model for Il Principe - but they are unforgivable if carried out by a
woman. Tradition has it that woman’s role is to nurture, not to destroy; a destroyer cannot be a good mother and if her gendered depravity - also perfectly forgiven and even praised in the case of a man - is highlighted, the long-established dichotomy between the saint and the whore is maintained, thus contributing to exalt the figure of the loving mother and devoted wife.

As Anne Elliot suggests in Jane Austen’s Persuasion, books are not reliable judges of female behaviour, since they have mostly been written by men. They “had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything”. However, even if women did not have such easy access to the pen, the oral transmission of folktales has traditionally been their domain. They have inherited and transmitted age-long stories that also display this dichotomy. It is possible that, due to this internalisation of the patriarchal discourse, instead of rebelling against the system that oppresses them, women have been frequently impelled to play by its rules, becoming the cruelest enemies to themselves. It is precisely on this aspect of female enmity that we want to focus our attention on this article.

The release in spring 2004 of the film Mean Girls, offered a comic albeit worrying account of female rivalry, in this case, among teenagers. A fictional comedy based on Rosalind Wiseman’s best-selling book Queen Bees and Wannabees: Helping your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends and Other Realities of Adolescence, Mean Girls was described by Time magazine as “a chilling account of the life our girls navigate in their school lunchrooms and hallways”, which Wiseman presented as a serious issue facing girls across the nation. After reading the book and confessing herself impressed by the social dynamics it depicted, screenwriter Tina Fay (who also appears in the film as the maths teacher Ms Norbury) considered its adaptation necessary as she deemed that the phenomenon of “Girl World nastiness bore further investigation”.

The movie tells the story of Cady, a teenager who finds herself thrown into “Girlworld” after spending twelve years in Africa, where she had been home-schooled by her parents. After moving to the States, she has to face the unseen rules that dictate the way girls are expected to behave in high-school. A quite intelligent girl, Cady is, however, ensnared by the group called “The Plastics” whose leader is referred to by the rest of the students as the Queen Bee. Curiously, her name is Regina and her personality is clearly revealed by one of the characters introducing Cady to school-life: “evil takes human form in Regina George”. As Rosalind Wiseman explains in her book, the Queen Bee is “a mixture of charisma, force, money, looks, strong will and manipulation; she silences both girls and boys and her popularity is based on fear and control”. Her kingdom is supported by a group of loyal servants, sidekicks, described in the movie as the queen bee’s workers. After a series of false friendships, back-stabbing, cruel gossiping and serious insulting, -
“girl-on-girl crime” - through an exercise of female bonding, Ms Norbury is capable of restoring peace: Cady recovers her identity, the group of the Plastics disintegrates and they face the prospect of a new year at school, having learnt their lesson well: “Girl World was at peace. School was a shark tank and now I could float”, Cady reflects.

Those cinemagoers familiar with teen movies cannot fail to see a reminiscence of the behaviour of another group of rich and popular girls in the film *Heathers*, a cult movie released in 1988. The title of the film refers to the name of three members of the group: Heather Chandler (who embodies the queen bee), Heather Duke and Heather McNamara, “three beautiful Priestesses of Put-down [whose] idea of a good time is to slay with sarcasm, ruin reputations and generally asset dominance over the dweeb masses". The fourth member of the group, Veronica Sawyer, played by a young Wynona Ryder, in some respects reminds us of Cady in *Mean Girls*. As is the case with Cady, Veronica is attracted by the popular girls and like her she seems to be different from the others. They both are very intelligent and realise that the queen bees’ behaviour with other people is extremely cruel and highly reproachable. Veronica’s willingness to differentiate herself from the Heathers is patent in her reply to a question posed by JD, the new boy at school, who evidently dislikes the clique’s type of bullying. To his “Are you a Heather?” she answers: “No, I’m a Veronica”.

The film provides several instances of girl-on-girl crime, in fact towards anyone regarded as “the scum of the school”. Heather Chandler exerts her power over Veronica by forcing her to do cruel things, for instance, imitating a popular boy’s handwriting in a fake love letter to Martha Dunnstock (“Dumptruck”), a fat girl isolated from the rest of the students. This series of actions, Heather insists, are necessary if Veronica wants to be “a member of the most powerful clique of school”. When Heather’s cruelty turns to Veronica after her behaviour at a university party - “Monday morning I’ll tell everybody” - Veronica writes in her diary “I want to kill. I must stop Heather […]. Killing Heather would be like offing the Wicked Witch of the West”. Her wish will be granted by the intervention of JD, who poisons Heather. At that moment, an apparently typical teen comedy turns darker and moves further beyond the genre, when JD’s attempts to purge the school from any of its unwanted students transform him into a ruthless killer, taking Veronica on his stride. The dual nature of the girls’ friendship is revealed by JD’s words after Veronica laments her death: “I just killed my best friend!” she cries, “And your worst enemy”, JD adds. Indeed, many deeply rooted hatreds hide beneath the mask of kindness and uninterested friendship.

Far from making her high school the nice place Veronica wanted it to be, Heather’s death makes her more popular than ever and the dead queen bee is simply substituted by another Heather (Duke) - power is thus
transferred “from Heather to Heather” - who proves as ruthless as her predecessor. After hearing the third Heather in the group - McNamara - publicly exposing her personal problems to a radio program, the new queen bee suggests to Veronica “We’ll crucify her”, conveying through her words a powerful image of girl-on-girl crime of the type more explicitly depicted in Mean Girls.

A “dissection of teenage girl societal interaction”,7 free from the darkness pervading Heathers, Mean Girls intelligently portrays rivalry among women, a common phenomenon which the Mexican anthropologist Marcela Lagarde considers one of the main dangers for the helpful development of feminism, and an evil directly connected to the dominant patriarchal order.8 History offers lots of examples of women who exert cruelty on their own gender, and these have been transformed into stereotypes of evil, especially if they are somewhat free from male authority. Underlying this apparent independence remains, as we will see, a need to be defined by the relationship with the male.

Witches, spinsters, rich widows who decide not to remarry or unloving stepmothers in control of the power left by an absent father, independent women have traditionally been portrayed as a menace for the order established by patriarchal society. “An abominable sort of conceited independence”, are the words used by Miss Bingley in Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice to abuse Elizabeth Bennet’s decision to walk around alone in the country in order to see her ill sister,9 whereas still nowadays, a woman who decides not to adapt herself to the traditional roles established for her - freely rejecting, for instance, marriage or maternity - is seen in some quarters as a weird specimen going against what nature has intended for her.

This female independence has very often taken the form in popular representations of the collective imagination - from traditional folktales to contemporary Hollywood movies - of wicked, evil women who sometimes are the worst enemies to themselves. It is our contention that independent women are usually portrayed as a threat by both men and women writing in what Gilbert and Gubar have called “the misogynistic context of Western literary culture”.10 since they are a danger to the image of virtue dictated by the established social order. However, we will also explore how, in this type of society, this wickedness may be the only way left for them to survive whilst maintaining their autonomy.

Fairy tales are probably the narratives which better express classic conflicts between women. Very often we can see, at their core, a story of female enmity, usually directed from a mature wicked woman towards a young, virtuous girl.11 The old, fallen woman, as the representation of the world of experience from which the heroine must be preserved, is introduced as a threat to the eternal state of innocence in which a woman is expected to remain. Cinderella and Snow White, for instance, provide us with good
examples of unloving stepmothers who mistreat their righteous and virginal stepdaughters; in the case of Cinderella because the stepmother wants to foster her own offspring and, in the case of Snow White, due to her jealousy over the princess’s youth and supposedly superior beauty. Since physical appearance has traditionally been the most valuable asset for a woman to move in the social scale, - beauty makes her eligible for marriage - it should come as no surprise that anyone considered superior in beauty is an enemy that must be destroyed. For Cinderella’s stepmother, the heroine’s beauty and docility is a menace to her own daughters’ marriage prospects and, for Snow White’s, it threatens her superior status. Whereas most females in the natural world make their choice about the partner they want to father their progeny, and it is the male who has to struggle to be the chosen one, in a patriarchal society, man chooses and the woman is elected.

A possible reason why independent women are easily portrayed as wicked beings may be found in the menace they pose to the established patriarchal order, under which women can be easily controlled as long as they are dependent on the male. Theoretically, if there is no economic or emotional need for the male, there is no reason why a self-governing woman should be vulnerable to his control. This could be a good reason to explain why witches - who traditionally are in control of alternative forms of knowledge - are a key target for misogyny.

Most women have not been by tradition so fortunate as to enjoy the economic independence that would enable them to run their lives as wished. A typical case is that of women who, unable to inherit their father’s fortune, had to rely on marriage as a means of survival. As Marina Warner has explained, stories relating “the tensions between competitors for a (young) man’s allegiance … reflect the difficulty of women making common cause within existing matrimonial arrangements.” 12 A single woman, therefore, was limited as to the extent of her possibilities to move on the social scale unless she was the heir to her father’s fortune, as in the case of Jane Austen’s Emma Woodhouse. In contrast with her protégé Harriet Smith, who needs to find a suitable partner, Emma can afford to remain single, since as she says to her friend “a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable”. 13 Emma can then act as Harriet’s fairy godmother since she initially poses no threat to her. This is not the case, for instance, of Miss Bingley in Pride and Prejudice. Eager to appear always superior to any other woman in Mr Darcy’s eyes - whom she undoubtedly envisages as her prospective husband - she takes every opportunity to abuse any aspect of Elizabeth Bennet’s appearance or character in order to diminish her attractiveness to the male gaze:

“For my own part,” she rejoiced, “I must confess that I never could see any beauty in her. Her face is too thin; her complexion has no brilliancy; and her features are not at all
handsome. Her nose wants character; there is nothing marked in its lines. Her teeth are tolerable, but not out of the common way; and as for her eyes, which have sometimes been called so fine, I never could perceive any thing extraordinary in them. They have a sharp, shrewish look, which I do not like at all; and in her air altogether, there is a self-sufficiency without fashion, which is intolerable.”

It is easy to see women as rivals when marriage is at stake, but it is not the only situation that encourages female rivalry. Warner again reminds us that “a mother-in-law had good reason to fear her son’s wife, when she often had to strive to maintain her position and assert her continuing rights to a livelihood in the patrilineal household. If she was widowed, her vulnerability became more acute”. Jane Austen provides us with another example presenting us five women economically dependent on one man in *Sense and Sensibility*. In this case, the one married to the heir uses her power of persuasion to install herself as mistress of the family house, reducing her mother and sisters-in-law to the condition of visitors.

According to Carmen Alborch, the roots for this rivalry lie in the social asymmetry that subordinates women, divides them, confronts them and transforms them - as a necessary condition for the survival of the system - in rivals that compete to occupy a place in the world, a place that has been, until recently, very limited. These instances of female enmity contribute to maintain the same order that oppresses women. In order to survive, therefore, it is important for a patriarchal society to keep women as enemies. Divide and you win.

Granting that this enmity is explained as a survival strategy, why do we still find instances of woman-on-woman crime, even in cases where independence makes competition unnecessary and supposedly renders women invulnerable to this sort of devious behaviour? Is it true that, as Marcela Lagarde claims, women have interiorised the patriarchal discourse that makes them depend on the value men want to ascribe to them? Is it true that they have assimilated the condition of inferiority, that they have swallowed up and are blocked by misogyny and that in order to ascertain their value women need to deprecate other women (I am worthier if you are less so)? Do they need to be destroyers in order to be survivors and is then the idea of female sorority a fallacy? Or can it be that this is simply the image of femaleness rendered by patriarchal discourses?

An interesting case to study in order to see the complexity of this issue is offered by one of the female characters that has captivated the imagination of moviegoers as a powerful image of the wicked woman: the Marquise de Merteuil of Stephen Frears’s *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988). The
character played by Glenn Close, together with the one she played in *Fatal Attraction*, made her the popular representation of the wicked, evil woman in the eighties. Frears’s film is an adaptation of Choderlos de Laclos’s novel, which depicted French aristocratic circles in the eighteenth century “at a time just before the revolution, when the decadence of the aristocracy has become an end in itself”. It tells the story of the Marquise de Merteuil and Vicomte de Valmont (played by John Malkovich). The Marquise is an economically independent woman. She does not need completion through a man since her power is given to her by her condition of rich widow.

Eager to take revenge upon a former lover who is ready to marry a virtuous young woman (Cécile de Volanges), the Marquise, “swoops down like a hawk upon the innocent and the naïve” and plans to ruin the young girl’s virtue using Valmont, also a former lover, as an instrument. In her world of intrigues, this schemer does not hesitate to destroy both men and women as long as she remains in control. Valmont, admiring the way she lies and gets people to do whatever she wants, describes her as “a genuine wicked woman”. There is a moment in the film when she explains to him how she invented herself, her wickedness being a way to survive in a world dominated by men, where women were obliged to be submissive and virtuous:

[Valmont]: I’ve often wondered how you managed to invent yourself.
[Marquise]: Oh, I had no choice, did I? I’m a woman. Women are obliged to be far more skilful than men. You can ruin our reputation and our life for a few well chosen words. So of course I had to invent not only myself but the ways of a escape no one had ever thought of before. I succeeded because I’ve always known I was born to dominate your sex on advantage of my own.
[Valmont]: Yes, but what I asked was how.
[Marquise]: When I came out into society I was fifteen; I already knew that the role I was condemned to was to be quiet when I was told, being the perfect opportunity to listen and observe not to what people told me, that naturally was of no interest, but whatever was they were trying to hide. I practised detachment. I learned how to look cheerful when under the table I stuck a fork under the back of my hand. I became a virtuoso of deceit. It wasn’t pleasure I was after. It was knowledge.

However, something will spoil the Marquise’s plans. Valmont falls in love with Madame de Tourvel (played by an angelic Michelle Pfeiffer), a woman he has planned to seduce and who represents the ideal of virtue. The
Marquise will not allow her to win Valmont’s heart. Despite the Marquise’s independence, Tourvel becomes her competitor when she threatens to take predominance over her in Valmont’s heart. In consequence, she has to destroy her. Her victory reflecting how women can truly become the worst enemies of their own gender, as the Marquise is fully aware when she says: “When a Woman strikes at the heart of another she seldom misses and the wound is invariably fatal”.

Nonetheless, it would be simplistic to explain this character’s behaviour as a mere instance of female rivalry. From her previous assertion, Valmont extracts the wrong conclusion that there is nothing “a woman enjoys so much as victory over another woman”. A triumphant Marquise gloats on her victory over her opponent: “The victory wasn’t over her…it was over you”. These last words can be read as a metaphor of her victory over the patriarchal order, which renders her fully independent from male control. However, her victory won’t last long as at the end her intrigues are known to everybody - after Valmont’s death fighting a duel and she is publicly humiliated in the theatre.

The film’s discourse presents a circulaular structure, the closing scene bringing us back to the opening shot when the Marquise is shown looking at herself in her dressing mirror and smiling with self-satisfaction, offering an image of self-confidence and power. The closing shot of the movie shows the Marquise again in front of the mirror, but now the woman whose image it reflects is not a self-satisfied but a defeated one. Without daring to look at herself, she begins to remove her make-up, to get rid of her mask.

As usual, it is the wicked woman who is condemned by society, whereas her male counterpart, who has acted as evil as her, gets redemption through his death. Although the mask has fallen from the Marquise’s face, we have peeped into a world where everyone wears one, the mask of hypocrisy, and will continue doing so. We have been introduced to a society in which men will still insist on marrying virtuous and faithful women even if they will never consider offering them the same. In destroying these instances of female virtue, the Marquise de Mertueil is really destroying the ideal of femaleness sustained by patriarchy.

The end of Heathers provides a clue to the way of achieving female sorority, as it happens in Mean Girls. After the death of JD, Veronica realises she does not need a boy to go to the prom. In fact she does not need to go to the prom at all. She prefers to ask the bullied Martha to watch a movie together. The last shots of the film show Veronica and Martha walking away. Veronica chooses female friendship with someone outside the Queen Bee’s circle. She no longer needs to be defined by the male.

If, as the screen-writer of Mean Girls believes, girl-on-girl crime is instinctive, it can be argued that it is not so much a biological instinct but one bred over years of domination under patriarchal dictates. When a woman
needs completion or is defined by her relation to a man, the destruction of the others is a question of mere survival. In Mean Girls, the war between the girls really starts when Cady is attracted to Aaron, Regina’s ex-boyfriend. An up-to-then self-confident Cady finds herself immersed in a world where girls have indeed assimilated the misogynistic discourse used by men, as Ms. Norbury cleverly detects: “You’ve to stop calling you sluts and whores. It’s ok for the guys to call you sluts and whores”. This will be the lesson learnt by Cady towards the end of the movie:

Calling someone else fat won’t make you any skinnier; calling someone stupid doesn’t make you smarter; and ruining Regina George’s life definitely didn’t make me any happier. All you can do in life is try to solve the problem in front of you.

At that moment, the problem that Cady has to face is a mathematical one involving limits which she has to solve in order to win a school contest. While she struggles to find the answer, she remembers that the day Ms Norbury was explaining limits in class she was distracted by Aaron’s new haircut. The shot shows Cady looking at Aaron while, behind him, the teacher writes on the blackboard. “Now, what was behind Aaron’s head?” Cady wonders. While she questions herself, Aaron progressively disappears from the screen allowing Cady to see the blackboard, which enables her to give the correct answer and win the contest. The film thus insists on the need for women to develop as individuals, free from the urge to be validated by men. Only when females learn their true value will a healthy and free relation between the genders be effective.

Notes

1 As recorded by Matarazzo, a chronicler from Perugia, hostile to the Borgia family. Quoted in Sarah Bradford, Lucrecia Borgia. Una mujer extraordinaria en un mundo de conspiraciones. Trans. Marta Pino Moreno. Planeta, Barcelona, 2005, p. 97. Quotation translated into English by the authors of the present article.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.


Ibid., p. 35.

Ibid., p. 16


