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Searching for Our Foremothers: A Philosophical Journey through the Alternative Genres of Women Writers

April Hall

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Searching for Our Foremothers: A Philosophical Journey through the Alternative Genres of Women Writers

Abstract

In the history of philosophy, there is a shortage, and often a total absence, of women's voices in the philosophical canon. I take this notable lack of female philosophical contribution not as evidence that women were not 'capable' or 'interested' in philosophical inquiry, but rather that their contributions are mainly to be found in alternative genres that were more open for women to participate in. I propose that present-day philosophers who are interested in locating the philosophical activities of women would benefit from an exploration of what I am terming "alternative genres." I shall focus in particular on personal correspondence during the Early Modern period, the novel in the nineteenth century, and feminist cinema in the twentieth century. Each of these forms contributes a richly unique perspective on central philosophical themes and affords contemporary philosophers a venue through which to access the philosophical thought of women writers in these historical periods.

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SEARCHING FOR OUR FOREMOTHERS: A PHILOSOPHICAL JOURNEY
THROUGH THE ALTERNATIVE GENRES OF WOMEN WRITERS

By

April Hall

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ABSTRACT

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Introduction

In the history of philosophy, there is a shortage, and often a total absence, of women's voices in the philosophical canon. I take this notable lack of female philosophical contribution not as evidence that women were not interested in or capable of philosophical inquiry, but rather that their contributions are mainly to be found in alternative genres that traditionally have been more open for women to participate in. I shall not, in this paper, present theories or speculations about the reasons for women's historical exclusion from mainstream philosophy, nor shall I endeavor to gauge the extent to which women may be underrepresented in contemporary philosophy, although some of the material I shall explore is a product of recent times. It will be sufficient for my present purposes merely to note that such exclusion has in fact been present in the history of philosophy. I propose that contemporary philosophers who are interested in locating the historical philosophical activities of women would benefit from an exploration of what I am terming "alternative genres." I shall focus in particular on personal correspondence during the Early Modern period, the novel in the nineteenth century, and feminist cinema in the twentieth century. Each of these forms contributes a rich and unique perspective on central philosophical themes and affords contemporary philosophers a venue through which to access the philosophical thought and contributions of women writers and thinkers in these historical periods.

This project developed as I neared the end of my undergraduate study, having logged forty-two hours of philosophy credits. With too few exceptions, the reading lists for my courses were comprised entirely of male philosophers. Again with too few exceptions, the gender demographic among the students in my classes was

overwhelmingly male. While I never felt out of place, nor did I ever feel as though my contributions were valued less than those of my male peers, I was acutely aware of the near absence of women's voices in the traditional philosophical canon. Through much of my studies, I dismissed this phenomenon as one of the many unfortunate legacies of western patriarchal societies. I supposed that women did not participate in philosophical discourse because they were confined to narrowly prescribed domestic duties: childbearing, childrearing, housekeeping, and such. Women's historical exclusion from the workforce and from academia, I reasoned, created a social situation in which women were unable to contribute professionally to philosophy as a discipline. Of course, I concluded, there are few contributions from women in the history of philosophy, and of course, philosophy being a male-dominated and male-influenced field, there wouldn't be a reasonably balanced ratio of men and women in philosophy classes.¹ *It's okay*, I told myself, *At least now things are changing*. But I have come to realize that it's *not* okay. Although my somewhat glib dismissal of the lack of women's voices in philosophy may have some factual merit, there is no good reason to suppose that women were not engaged in philosophical thought. In fact, it seems absurd to believe that women, prior the last few decades, did not think philosophically about their world. It is this absurdity which led me to search for our philosophical foremothers.

My search, not surprisingly, led me to explore alternative genres. Women in the Early Modern period, for example, did not write philosophical essays and treatises, but they did write letters. Through examining their personal correspondence, we can find instances of great philosophical insight and a deep philosophical curiosity. Many women during this period engaged with traditional philosophical discourse, questioning

philosophical arguments and occasionally suggesting theories of their own. The philosophical activities of women grew somewhat in the nineteenth century, as women gained greater access to education and to certain literary professions. Nonetheless, the most widely recognized and most often taught nineteenth century philosophers are male.² One might argue that this imbalance is due to the limited scope of women's philosophical work, or that because women did not have full participation in traditional philosophical discourse, their work was not of the same caliber as that of male philosophers. Both of these responses, I believe, are naïve and preclude the possibility of discovering important philosophical contributions of women. While it is true that the mainstream philosophy of the period is predominantly male, women wrote in a variety of other genres – most notably, the novel. Nineteenth century novels by women authors provide an unorthodox way to explore potentially rich philosophical thought. I shall explore one such approach in part two of this paper. In part three of this paper, I shall examine feminist cinema as a potentially viable way to discover women's philosophical activities. Admittedly, women's published philosophy in the twentieth century is far more prevalent than in any of the preceding periods; however, their work remains in the minority and is often underrepresented in, or even absent from, mainstream discourse.

I have deliberately chosen three genres that fall outside what most mainstream philosophers would deem “legitimate” philosophy. These alternative genres, however, should not be dismissed simply because they are not in a particular accepted form or style. In fact, their differences can create an illuminating philosophical picture. The modern journal article, for example, is perhaps the most employed philosophical genre. I shall argue, however, that in many cases personal correspondence in the Early Modern

period closely mirrors the modern journal article. Male and female philosophers alike wrote letters back and forth to discuss and refine particular philosophical issues. When we examine women letter writers, however, we shall find that their writings contain both philosophical merit and a striking air of deference to their male contemporaries, as is the case with the letters of Princess Elisabeth to Descartes under consideration in this paper. Women often diminish the import of their own thoughts, although they *do* offer them, and esteem the thoughts of other (male) philosophers. One of the challenges of looking at women's personal correspondence is to move beyond the deference and to discover the philosophical merit of their thoughts and observations.

Novels, conversely, bear no resemblance whatsoever to any mainstream philosophical genre. Their characters, circumstances, and other content are fictional. They do not present cohesive philosophical arguments that can be analyzed for their relevance and plausibility. There are no explicit conclusions with which to find fault. Philosophers, however, are too quick to dismiss novels to the territory of other disciplines, such as literary criticism. Novels, I argue, *can* provide compelling philosophical pictures that in turn may be analyzed in traditional ways, as well as some non-traditional ways. Novels by women authors, by extension, afford us an opportunity to access and assess particular philosophical pictures that emerge from their creative writing. I use the term "philosophical pictures" because it highlights the primary difference between traditional philosophical genres and the novel as a genre. Even though we cannot trace the logic of a particular argument in a novel, we can examine its characters, their lives, and their circumstances to generate a "picture" that may reflect a particular philosophical point of view. I shall not argue that whatever view one finds in

the analysis is directly attributable to the woman author; however, as a picture that was deliberately created by the author, for whatever purposes, I maintain that we can reasonably assert that whatever philosophical picture we discover in a female-authored novel bears some mark of the author's thought.³ In the second part of this paper, I shall investigate the philosophical picture that emerges from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to demonstrate that such a task is worthy of a philosopher's attention.

In the final section of this paper, I shall look at Marleen Gorris' 1983 feminist film, *A Question of Silence*. Modern cinema is perhaps the most controversial of the three alternative genres. It differs from traditional philosophical discourse both in terms of its content and its mode of presentation. In film, we are no longer analyzing written text, but dialogue and cinematography. However, much like the novel, I believe that feminist films can offer valuable philosophical pictures that are worthy of further investigation and analysis. In addition, films arguably can reveal to a greater extent what a director's intentions regarding interpretation of a particular film. We can look specifically at ways in which a film is edited and shot, for example, to find evidence of a director's deliberate choice in how a film is presented. In other words, we have available aspects that are particular to film-making that can supplement our analysis of plot, character, and setting. As with personal correspondence and novels, feminist cinema as an alternative genre can be a fruitful and productive venue through which philosophers can explore the philosophical contributions of women whose viewpoints we may not otherwise incorporate into our philosophical discourse.

One last note is necessary before I begin this search for our philosophical foremothers. My argument may mistakenly be taken as a general indictment of

traditional philosophy. While perhaps it is in some sense an indictment, I am not proposing that we abandon or reduce the value of traditional philosophical genres. The journal article, treatise, essay, and so on, remain some of the best formats for articulating philosophical arguments in the most clear and precise way possible. Without them, philosophy would be a muddled discipline indeed. Much of what we can learn from alternative genres, while valuable, may also be speculative by its very nature. As such, it is not offered here as a replacement for traditional philosophical genres, but as a supplement to our philosophical activity that takes into account the thoughts of neglected women thinkers and writers. By undertaking this investigation, I intend to show that traditional philosophical discourse can be expanded and enriched by incorporating what we learn from the various philosophical pictures we find in alternative genres.

NOTES:

¹ It is worth noting that the racial imbalance in philosophical disciplines is far more pronounced than the gender imbalance; however, issues surrounding race and philosophy are far beyond the scope of this paper.

² For example, John Stuart Mill's work is taught in such diverse courses as ethics, political science, philosophy of law, and literature. On the other hand, Mary Wollstonecraft's work appears primarily on the syllabi of various Women's Studies courses and feminist theory. Interestingly, J.S. Mill's work is found in these contexts as well.

³ I want to distinguish here my argument from the "intentional fallacy" as argued by Wimsatt and Beardsley in their influential article, "The Intentional Fallacy," *Sewanee Review*, 54 (1946): 468-488. Reprinted in *On Literary Intention*, ed. D. Newton-de-Molina, (Edinburgh: University Press, 1976): 1-13. I do not mean to assert that we can discover *with certainty* precisely what an author intended by crafting a novel in the way that she did; I do mean, however, that the philosophical pictures that emerge in a novel can suggest to us what the author has shown us. There will of course be variations among interpretations of a particular text; the same is true of traditional philosophical writings. Lack of certainty about an author's intentions thus should not be appealed to in order to dismiss the philosophical merit of the novel as a genre. To do so would invite relegating all written philosophical works to a skeptical abyss.

I. Princess Elisabeth's Personal Correspondence with Descartes

In Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia's personal correspondence with Descartes, we can discover all of the elements present in the modern journal article. We find in the letters the familiar pattern of one philosopher presenting his views, another challenging those views, the first responding to the objections, the second discovering new difficulties (or in this case reiterating the original problem as yet insufficiently addressed), and so on. In contemporary philosophy, both men and women participate in this kind of exchange. Princess Elisabeth's correspondence with Descartes suggests that the same is true of earlier historical periods; however, the systematic study of philosophical letters by women goes largely ignored in mainstream contemporary scholarship.

I shall argue that such a study is indeed valuable for contemporary philosophers, because its absence perpetuates the myth, unintentionally no doubt, that women are relative newcomers to the philosophical playing field – that the reason we do not study women philosophers in historical periods is because they did not contribute anything of significance. If by significance we mean complex philosophical systems, treatises, and essays, then indeed women did not contribute anything of “significance” thus construed. However, it is another question altogether whether the philosophical writings of women in historical periods have significance in the history of philosophy. Examining the philosophical letters of women is one way to find an answer to this more pressing, and philosophically interesting, question. I offer here selected passages from Princess Elisabeth's correspondence with Descartes as an extended illustration of how we might obtain a “yes” answer to the question of whether women philosophers wrote anything of significance in the history of philosophy that merits further academic study.

This selection from Princess Elisabeth's correspondence with Descartes centers on Descartes' account of mind/body interaction. I shall provide a brief account of Descartes' original position so that we may place Elisabeth's writings in their appropriate context. In his *Sixth Meditation*, Descartes expands and strengthens a notion he had developed in an earlier meditation that the mind and body were in fact two distinct substances. The two are united in some way, but remain separate substances with unique properties. The body has for its nature, for example, that it is divisible. That is, we can easily perceive that the body is made up of various parts. It is also corporeal – made of some physical substance which occupies space; that is, it is extended. The mind, by contrast, is comprised of some incorporeal substance that is not extended in space. The mind is essentially a thinking thing that is indivisible. We may be tempted, Descartes warns, to suppose that various faculties of the mind such as willing, understanding, and sensory perception constitute its various parts, thus making it divisible. According to Descartes, this would be a mistake because “it is one and the same mind that wills, and understands and has sensory perceptions.”¹ We cannot call these faculties “parts” because the faculties of the mind cannot be conceived independently, apart from the mind and its other faculties.² They operate as a whole and cannot be separated from the mind in the same way as a member can be separated from the body.

Although the mind and the body are separate, distinct substances, Descartes continues, they are united together in each human being. We are immediately aware of their union as a result of our everyday experience of it. The interaction between the two which constitutes their union is complex and is the locus for Princess Elisabeth's philosophical inquiries. Descartes maintains that the body can produce sensations in the

mind such as pleasure, pain, hunger, and thirst. Likewise, the mind can produce volition or movement in the body. For example, as I am typing this paper, my fingers do not move randomly around the keyboard at the impulse of some non-thinking bodily function; they are directed by the activity of my mind. It is this interaction between the mind and body which both preserves the body and contributes to its well-being. The mind directs the body's voluntary movements, keeping it out of harm's way whenever possible. The body tells the mind when it is injured or sick, enabling the mind to better care for the body's physical needs. Descartes tells us very little about the nature of the interaction between the mind and the body or the process by which it occurs, prompting Princess Elisabeth's initial query in a letter written in May of 1643.

Elisabeth writes:

I beseech you tell me how the soul of man (since it is but a thinking substance) can determine the spirits of the body to produce voluntary actions. For it seems every determination of movement happens from an impulsion of the thing moved, according to the manner in which it is pushed by that which moves it, or else, depends on the qualification and figure of the superficies of the latter. Contact is required for the first two conditions, and extension for the third. You entirely exclude extension from your notion of the soul, and contact seems to me incompatible with an immaterial thing.³

Of the various objections that were raised subsequent to the publication of his *Meditations*, Descartes acknowledges that Elisabeth's question is the one "which can be asked with the greatest justification in sequel to the writings I have published."⁴

Elisabeth demonstrates both a recognition of perhaps the most obvious problem with

Descartes' mind/body distinction, i.e., how it can be that material and immaterial substances can share a causal relationship, and a deep understanding of Descartes' own theory of physics.⁵ Philosopher Deborah Tollefsen notes that Elisabeth's use of the term "determination of movement" and her exposition of its consequences "reveals clearly that Elisabeth recognized the distinction between determination and motion and understood Descartes' view that determination may change while motion remains the same."⁶ More than that, however, I believe that Elisabeth shows not only a mere understanding of both Descartes' mind/body distinction and his physics, but also a capacity for critical thinking such that her letters deserve more philosophical attention.

Elisabeth's contribution to Cartesian-inspired discourse should in no way be trivialized. Through her correspondence, she shows herself to be much more than simply a student or follower of Descartes. Although her criticism of Cartesian interactionism is not the first such criticism to be lodged, she is unique in that she places the particular problem within the framework of Descartes other ideas about motion. Her highly developed philosophical acuity is apparent in that she did not merely point out an inconsistency in Descartes' account of the mind and body, which in itself would have been sufficient to make her point, but she approached the problem in a sophisticated manner, bringing in other corroborating evidence from within the Cartesian system as a whole. Her method was very much like that of a professional philosopher, although her status as such is only recently being suggested.

Descartes himself did not trivialize Elisabeth's criticism, although his tone is on several occasions condescending and patronizing (of which I shall have more to say

later). Her first inquiry thus gave rise to a series of correspondences in which Descartes offers a more complete account of mind/body interaction. He writes:

I consider that in us are certain primitive notions that are like originals on whose model we form all our other knowledge... We have, as regards body in particular, only the notion of extension... and, as regards the soul alone, we have only that of thought... finally, for the soul and the body together, we have only that of their union, on which depends that of the force of the soul for moving the body, and of the body for acting upon the soul by causing its feelings and passions.⁷

Descartes then carefully explains to Elisabeth that we must take caution not to apply the notion of one thing to another thing to which it does not belong. He believes that her error lies in attributing to the soul what properly belongs to the body. Her appeal to the physics of determination and movement is an accurate description of what happens when one body is acted upon by another body, but, Descartes claims, it is inappropriate to conceive of the interaction between the mind and the body on the same model.

Descartes offers an analogy whereby a body is moved toward the earth by weight. We have no difficulty in understanding how weight has the force to move a body without positing the existence of two substances acting physically upon one another. When we perceive weight compelling a body toward the earth, we perceive weight and the body as one entity. Likewise, according to Descartes, when we perceive the soul interacting with the body or the body interacting with the soul, we perceive them as one – that is, we are perceiving naught but their union. They nonetheless are two distinct substances associated with opposing primitive notions.

Elisabeth, however, is not entirely convinced by Descartes' analogy. She concedes that she is in fact guilty of committing exactly the errors Descartes warns against; however, she nonetheless still cannot comprehend how, using Descartes' weight analogy, we should understand the manner in which an immaterial soul and a material body can interact with one another such that each produces effects in the other. Elisabeth presses Descartes to explain, given what he had previously said concerning weight, "the idea by which we should judge how the soul (nonextended and immaterial) can move the body; nor why this power [that of weight moving a body]...ought persuade us that body can be pushed by something immaterial."⁸ One might say, in Descartes' defense, that Elisabeth's inability to comprehend Descartes' analogy can be attributed to a superficial understanding of the Cartesian system as a whole. Thus Elisabeth's continued pursuit of the question regarding mind/body interaction belies her incomplete understanding of Descartes' deeper philosophical concerns. And, in fact, Descartes emphasized in his first response to Elisabeth that his primary concern was to demonstrate that the body and soul are two distinct substances, and hence he deliberately said very little about their union so as not to inhibit his primary pursuit.

I would argue, however, that Elisabeth's persistence with her original objection in no way shows that she did not fully comprehend what Descartes was trying to accomplish. Her charge is not that Descartes has not shown us that the mind and body are distinct substances, or that the concept of two distinct substances is in itself incomprehensible, but that Descartes owes us a better explanation of how these two substances, being distinct (one material, one immaterial), can share any sort of effective causal relationship. In essence, Descartes still has a great deal of philosophical work to

do. Elisabeth draws attention to a particular inadequacy with Descartes' account, and in so doing, she shows that she does in fact fully comprehend Descartes' objective. What she does not comprehend is the very thing that Descartes himself seems to have trouble comprehending – his own account of interactionism. He once again tries to answer her question by another appeal to primitive notions:

...I note a great difference among these three kinds of notions, in that the soul conceives itself only by the pure understanding; body...can likewise be recognized by the understanding alone, but very much better by the understanding aided by the imagination; and finally, the things that pertain to the union of the soul and the body are recognized only obscurely by the understanding alone or even by the understanding as aided by the imagination; yet they are known very clearly by the senses.⁹

Here it seems that Descartes has in mind a kind of conceptual distinction between the activities of ordinary life, in which we perceive, through our senses, only the union of the mind and the body, and philosophical meditations, through which we come to know the distinct natures of the mind and the body. In the course of ordinary life, Descartes claims, we have direct experience of the union between the mind and body, but we (mistakenly) believe them to be one substance. It is through philosophical reflection, as prescribed in the *Meditations*, that we are able to recognize and know the true distinction between the two. Elisabeth has found “obscurity in the notion we have of their union,” Descartes claims, because “the human mind is [not] capable of conceiving very distinctly, and at the same time, both the distinction between the soul and the body, and also their

union; because to do so it is necessary to conceive them as one thing alone, and at the same time to conceive them as two, which is contrary.”¹⁰

Descartes recommends that Elisabeth merely accept and remember the knowledge she has gained through philosophical meditation about the notions of mind and body, while focusing primarily on activities that employ the understanding, the imagination, and the senses together. That is, he suggests that Elisabeth devote her time primarily to the business of ordinary life, and to limit the amount of time she spends in philosophical meditation so as to avoid unnecessary confusion. If she follows his advice, he believes, she will resolve the difficulty she finds in the notion of the union of the soul and the body. Descartes, however, seems to have greatly misrepresented, or misunderstood, the source of Elisabeth’s criticism. She has nowhere said that she finds the notion of the *union* between the mind and body obscure; on the contrary, she says, quite succinctly, “I too, find that the senses show me that the soul moves the body; but they fail to teach me (any more than the understanding and the imagination) the *manner* in which she does it.”¹¹ Thus, Descartes spends considerable effort trying to explain to Elisabeth *that* the soul and the body are united, but he never fully explains *how* their union functions as a causal relationship – which is precisely the question to which she was seeking an answer. Once again, Descartes fails to provide a satisfactory explanation of mind/body interaction.

Even if their correspondence had ended here, Princess Elisabeth’s contribution to historical philosophical discourse would have garnered significance; however, Elisabeth went beyond a mere analysis of Descartes’ position to offer a theory of her own regarding the interaction of the soul and the body. She proposes to Descartes that there are

“unknown properties in the soul that might suffice to reverse what your metaphysical mediations...persuaded me concerning [the soul’s] extension.”¹² She suggests that perhaps Descartes was in error when he reasoned that the soul is not extended. We cannot clearly perceive, given Descartes’ account, how an immaterial substance can produce effects in a material substance, nor can we clearly perceive the reverse. Descartes himself is unable to provide a clear explanation of how the two substances causally interact.

To reveal the potential error in attributing non-extension to the soul, Elisabeth refers to Descartes’ elaboration in his *Fourth Meditation* regarding the source of human error. He states, “I shall unquestionably reach the truth, if only I give sufficient attention to all the things which I perfectly understand, and separate these from all the other cases where my apprehension is more confused and obscure.”¹³ Since we do not have the requisite clear perception of the manner of mind/body interaction, we risk falling into error by adhering to a notion we find confused and obscure (e.g., an immaterial, non-extended soul interacting with a material, extended body). It would be more reasonable, Elisabeth claims, to attribute extension to the soul and thus provide a better account of mind/body interaction. She agrees with Descartes that thought is essential to the notion of soul, but she notes that extension is not contradictory to thought. Indeed, early on in their correspondence, Elisabeth writes, “...it would be easier for me to concede matter and extension to the soul, than the capacity of moving a body and of being moved, to an immaterial being.”¹⁴ By allowing that the soul could possess extension, Elisabeth seeks to avoid the obscurity and confusion that arises from Descartes view. Unfortunately, we do not have a full account of precisely what Elisabeth’s view of the soul would be, and

how it might fare against Descartes' view. *Prima facie*, she seems to provide one avenue by which we might avoid the same kinds of problems Descartes faces, although Elisabeth's full account, if she had written one, would likely have provided interesting fodder for philosophical debate.

Having presented the primary dialogue between Elisabeth and Descartes with regard to Cartesian interactionism, let me turn now to a brief discussion of the tone that their correspondence exhibits. Earlier I mentioned that Descartes is often condescending and patronizing toward Elisabeth, and equally as often he is flattering and adoring. This, perhaps, is to be expected (or at least is not surprising) given her critical views coupled with her sex and station; but what is more interesting is the tone of Elisabeth's letters to Descartes. She is often self-deprecating and displays astonishing deference toward Descartes even in the midst of raising pointed criticisms against his view. For example, in her first letter she "freely reveal[s] the weaknesses of [her] speculations," and in her following letter she thanks Descartes for "pointing out and correcting the flaws" in her reasoning (before she points out the flaws in his).¹⁵ In one letter, she details the flurried activity and responsibilities she faces in her life as a means to "excuse" her "stupidity in being unable to comprehend" Descartes' answer to her objection.¹⁶ She even implores him not to publish her correspondence.¹⁷ If Elisabeth appraised her intellectual work so poorly, one may wonder, why would she persist in seeking a satisfactory answer to her objection? Admittedly, there may be several ways to answer this question; I shall explore one such possibility.

A close examination of Elisabeth's letters to Descartes reveals that her interest in philosophy was more than just a hobby. Her social status kept Elisabeth extraordinarily

busy, and so her time for philosophical reflection was limited; however she seems to have engaged in philosophical thought at every available interval. Obtaining answers to tough philosophical questions seemed to be of greater concern to her than mere intellectual curiosity or passing fancy. Elisabeth's philosophical activity informed the way she thought about her world and lived within it. In her later letters to Descartes, Elisabeth demonstrates philosophical interests in a variety of subjects, including ethics and free will. It is apparent that philosophy constituted a vital portion of Elisabeth's life. From a contemporary perspective, we might be tempted to say that Elisabeth's deference and self-deprecation were feigned, in keeping with the cultural expectations of a woman in her position. It is also possible, however, that Elisabeth's devaluing of her own work arises from genuine conflict between her social constraints and her intellectual prowess.¹⁸ She may have genuinely esteemed her own contributions as less worthy than those of her male contemporaries. But that does not entail that we should so esteem them. On the contrary, Elisabeth's personal correspondence is worthy of philosophical discussion, for in her letters we find a glimpse into the philosophical thought of one of our early philosophical foremothers.

NOTES:

¹ René Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, with Selections from the Objections and Replies, trans. and ed. John Cottingham, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 2004, reprint), 59.

² The language here may be deceptive in that to speak of “a mind *and* its faculties” seems to suggest that the mind is by nature divisible. Descartes would likely reject this as an unfortunate linguistic accident with no real bearing on the true nature of the indivisible mind.

³ Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, personal correspondence, in Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period, ed. Margaret Atherton, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 11-12.

⁴ Descartes to Elisabeth, in Atherton, 13.

⁵ See René Descartes, Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology, trans. Paul J. Olscamp, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001).

⁶ Deborah Tollefsen, “Princess Elisabeth and the Problem of Mind-Body Interaction,” in *Hypatia*, Summer, vol. 14 no. 3 (1999), 64.

⁷ Descartes to Elisabeth, in Atherton, 13.

⁸ Elisabeth to Descartes, in Atherton. 16.

⁹ Descartes to Elisabeth, in Atherton. 17-18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹ Elisabeth to Descartes, in Atherton. 21.

¹² *Ibid.*, 21.

¹³ *Meditations*, 43.

¹⁴ Elisabeth to Descartes, in Atherton. 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12, 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁷ Descartes respected Elisabeth’s wishes and never published her letters. Her correspondence was not published until some time after her death, and even now her correspondence is not available in its entirety in an English translation. For the most

complete English edition of Princess Elisabeth's correspondence with Descartes, see The Princess and the Philosopher: Letters of Elisabeth of the Palatine to Rene Descartes, Andrea Nye, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

¹⁸ Research indicates that a similar discord between social constraints and intellectual ability persists today for young women in academic settings. For example, girls tend to volunteer answers less often than boys, and they often preface their verbal responses with apologies or phrases such as, "Well, I might be wrong, but..." or "I didn't really have anything important to say, but..." For a more detailed discussion, see Women, Men, and Society, Fifth Edition, by Claire Renzetti and Daniel Curran, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003).

II. The Novel as Alternative Philosophical Genre: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*

Exploring the novel in the nineteenth century as an alternative philosophical genre may seem controversial. It is not uncommon to call a novel 'philosophical,' but it does seem rather unusual to treat a novel philosophically, at least in professional discourse. We are, of course, accustomed to dealing with extended philosophical works, such as Descartes' *Meditations* and Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Our discipline is uniquely suited to analyzing and tracing the reasoning of these kinds of works. I shall argue here, however, that philosophers would benefit from applying the skills of our discipline to novels by women authors.¹ It takes no more than a brief survey of the nineteenth century philosophical canon to see that no women make the list. I find this silence unacceptable. As we have seen with the correspondence between Princess Elisabeth and Descartes, women were not absent from philosophical thought prior to the latter half of the twentieth century. Since it is the case, however, that women largely were not present in standard nineteenth century philosophical discourse, we must look elsewhere for their voices. Since the nineteenth century saw a rapid increase in the number of female novelists, the novel seems a natural place to start. Before I begin my examination of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, it will be beneficial to recall what I take to be the primary differences between the novel as a philosophical form and the form of traditional philosophy.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this piece, novels present us with philosophical 'pictures' through which we can access the philosophical thought of women authors. They differ from traditional philosophy primarily in that they do not

present us with sets of premises and conclusions by which we can deduce the validity of their claims. However, we should not dismiss their potential philosophical merit simply because they do not follow a prescribed, highly entrenched form. Instead, we should consider the form of the novel as an integral part of its overarching philosophical framework.² In other words, the form of a novel contributes to our understanding of its philosophical content in a way that is markedly distinct from traditional philosophical forms. One significant difference is the ways in which the novelistic form engages the reader with the text. Through character, plot, setting, and various literary devices, novels invite the reader to become a participant with the text to a greater extent than do traditional philosophical writings. In traditional philosophical genres, the reader becomes involved through the intellectual activities of comprehension and analysis. We first endeavor to properly understand the argument before us, and then we proceed to philosophical analysis. Whatever emotional or empathetic faculties traditional philosophical genres invoke lie primarily with whatever sympathies the reader has for the argument under consideration. And good philosophers, we are commonly taught, lay these aside when they are doing philosophy.

Novels, by contrast, engage the reader both intellectually and emotionally. Our response to a novel is complex because reading a novel simultaneously employs our intellect, our emotion, and our imagination. When we engage with a novel, we are often carried away by the narrative while we construct our own picture of what the novel is telling us, i.e., what it is 'about.' Literary theorist Wolfgang Iser notes, "A literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself [sic], for reading is only a pleasure when it is

active and creative.”³ We tend to identify with characters and empathize with their predicaments as the plot progresses. Settings in a novel can also produce both intellectual and empathetic responses in the reader; we may find ourselves outraged by squalid living conditions, calmed by tranquil countryside scenes, or frightened by dark caverns. Whereas traditional philosophical genres provide as many details as possible in support of an argument, novels regularly leave gaps in the narrative that it is up to the reader to fill in.⁴ Thus, in the process of reading a novel, readers make connections within the text and to their own world. Our interpretations of a text will vary from one person to another, but such variation occurs in standard philosophical genres as well and should not dissuade us from studying novels philosophically. Furthermore, the connections we make may help us to discover philosophical pictures that may in turn provide us access to the philosophical thoughts of women authors.

Let us now turn our attention to Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein* to see what philosophical picture emerges. The story surrounding her conception of the novel has become legendary.⁵ In the summer of 1816, Mary Shelly gathered in Geneva, Switzerland with three other male friends, her future husband Percy Blythe Shelley, Lord Byron, and “a doctor friend of theirs whom Mary refers to...as ‘poor Polidori.’”⁶ On a dark, stormy day the friends gathered together and told each other a handful of German ghost stories. The party was inspired (at the suggestion of Lord Byron) to write their own stories of the supernatural. Mary was the last to formulate an idea for a story; however, she was the only one of the group who finished one. The preface written in September, 1817 laments, “Two other friends (a tale from one of whom would be far more acceptable to the public than anything I can ever hope to produce) agreed to write... [but] the

following tale is the only one to have been completed.”⁷ The first edition of *Frankenstein* was published in 1818, followed by a revised version in 1831. In this project, I shall work with the 1831 revised edition. My analysis of the text shall focus on the novel’s central theme of creation. Many aspects of creation are explicit in the text, such as the moral responsibility of the creator toward that which is created, and vice versa, but there is another concept of additional significance that arises out of the gaps in the text. The entire novel centers on Victor Frankenstein’s creation of the monstrous creature and the dire consequences of that act.⁸ From the gaps in the text, however, we can read Frankenstein’s act of creation as a commentary on motherhood, a subject largely ignored in traditional philosophy. The philosophical picture that emerges from this reading is profoundly disturbing and reveals a characteristic of motherhood that is a terrifying reality for many women. It is a reality that runs counter to our received opinions about motherhood – the picturesque ideal – and is therefore fertile ground for philosophical investigation.

The ideal of motherhood is laid out explicitly in the opening chapter of Victor’s narrative. He recounts how his mother, prior to marrying his father, attends to her ailing father. The young Caroline Beaufort cares for her father with “the greatest tenderness;” she braids straw and performs other menial jobs “to earn a pittance scarcely sufficient to support life.”⁹ After her father passed away, leaving her orphaned and penniless, Caroline is taken in and cared for by one of Victor’s relatives at the request of Victor’s father, Alphonse Frankenstein; she and Alphonse marry two years later. Caroline is no less devoted as a wife than she was as a daughter. She is virtuous and graceful, and her husband “strove to shelter her, as a fair exotic is sheltered by the gardener.”¹⁰ Thus even

before Victor's birth, his mother was an angelic figure, more than human. After he was born, his mother showers him with love and affection. She fully accepts her duty to work with her husband "to bring [Victor] up for good...whose future lot it was in their hands to direct to happiness or misery, according as they fulfilled their duties towards [him]." She exercises similar care and compassion when she takes in the young child Elizabeth Lavenza to raise as her own daughter. When Elizabeth becomes ill with scarlet fever, Caroline tends to her with the same fervor with which she had attended her own father, but this time her care results in her own untimely death. Even in death, Caroline is a model of sainthood, resigning herself "cheerfully to death" and indulging "a hope of meeting [her family] in another world."¹¹ In Caroline, we find that the model for motherhood is the cheerful embrace of humble servitude, unconditional adoration and affection, and supreme self-sacrifice. In this she seems to be more than a woman.

Victor's successful animation of the creature places him in the role of creator; however, nowhere does Shelley portray Victor as a Divine Creator. He is still just a man. His act of creation therefore can be likened to the genesis of a new human life – that is, as a story of pregnancy, labor, delivery, and motherhood.¹² Throughout his childhood and adolescence, Victor labors hard to discover the "elixir of life" so that he might "banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death," but he flounders "desperately in a very slough of multifarious knowledge, guided by an ardent imagination and childish reasoning."¹³ Victor's struggle to discover the illusive elixir of life is eerily reminiscent of a young girl's desire to role-play her expectations of motherhood. Many young girls will fantasize about being a mother, the giver and sustainer of early life. Dolls or stuffed toys become their child and their play area

becomes transformed into their 'house.' Their childhood play is informed by their own "multifarious knowledge," i.e., by the diverse images of motherhood they learn from various women in their lives, and it is "guided by an ardent imagination and childish reasoning." Like Victor, their knowledge is naïve and incomplete. Victor discovers the inadequacy of his childhood fantasy, and leaves it behind for the study of more practical knowledge. In the same way, young girls cease to 'play house,' instead favoring their own practical development into an adult woman. For many women, though, as with Victor Frankenstein's dream of discovering the elixir of life, old childhood motherhood fantasies are not so easily banished.

Shortly after Victor enters the university in Ingolstadt, he finds a mentor whose views on the progress of natural science rekindle Victor's childhood ambitions. Thus commenced Victor's labored development of the nefarious creature. He devotes his whole life to applying his science toward one goal: to give life to another being. Sometime in the midst of his studies, "a sudden light broke in upon [him]" and Victor realizes he has discovered the secret of life.¹⁴ He doubts his own ability to bring into existence a creature as complex as a human being, but the promise of success prompts him to redouble his efforts, to the exclusion of all else. Victor neglects his close relationships and becomes distressed and anxious. He promises himself he will return to normal after his creature is complete. There is a compelling parallel to be drawn between Victor's progression toward creation and a woman's experience of pregnancy. His first insight into the secret of life is startlingly like that of a woman who experiences the first quickening of a developing fetus. The realization that a life is developing in her womb may bring with it a flood of doubts about her ability to birth and to parent a child. In

spite of her doubts, however, an expectant mother typically devotes all of her energy, both emotionally and physically, to this new life. She prepares a place for the child in anticipation of its birth, her body changes and devotes much of its energy to nourish the developing fetus, and she anticipates the responsibilities of becoming a mother. Like Victor, a pregnant woman may not exhibit the same level of attention to her relationships as she did prior to her pregnancy; she may feel isolated from those around her, perhaps even to the point of depression. She may comfort her anxieties with the notion that her life and body will return to a normal state once her child is delivered. Hence, if we understand Shelley's depiction of Victor's preparation for the 'birth' of his creature as parallel to a woman's experience of pregnancy, we find that the underpinnings of the favored image of motherhood begin to crumble. Pregnancy may in fact bring about intense feelings of love and responsibility, but often it is also accompanied by feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and depression. These negative aspects contradict the idyllic image of 'mother' embodied in Caroline Beaufort, which in *Frankenstein* foreshadows a more disturbing challenge to the impossible ideal.

"It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils," Victor Frankenstein relates.¹⁵ His long labor has finally come to fruition, and he beholds his living child for the first time. He expects to see a reflection of beauty, but instead he beholds a monster. The creature's skin is yellow and almost transparent; he has a thick mane of black hair, watery, almost colorless eyes, dark lips, and a "shriveled complexion."¹⁶ Victor cannot believe he has labored so long for such a hideous creature. He recoils and flees from the creature in horror and disgust. He feels bitter and disappointed, lethargic and weak, and he can neither eat nor sleep. Victor thus becomes

incapacitated and over the course of several months he is nursed back to health. During the interval, he has frequent disturbing nightmares about the fiendish creature he has brought forth. Even after his 'recovery,' his melancholy persists and he succumbs to several relapses. Again, the resemblance to a woman's experience is striking, and the picture that emerges from Shelly's depiction of Victor's labor and delivery is, on many levels, horrifying. Victor's description of the creature could apply equally well to a newborn baby. Many children are born jaundiced, and their skin takes on a yellow hue as a result. A newborn's skin is thin and can appear somewhat translucent, particularly if the child was born prematurely. A newborn's skin will also be shriveled from the months the child spent enclosed in amniotic fluid. The birthing process is difficult for the child as well as for the mother, and sometimes a newborn will emerge bruised. Viewed through the eyes of a mother who may be experiencing postpartum depression, a newborn infant can appear just as hideous as Frankenstein's monster. She may even respond to her child with the same repulsion as Victor displays toward his creature.

Spurred by repeated rejection, the creature sets out on a murderous rampage against Victor. His goal is to destroy everything Victor holds dear, since Victor has withheld from him everything that would have been dear to him. The creature's first victim, Victor's younger brother, embodies everything the creature covets most. The boy, William, is small, beautiful, and supremely loved by all who know him. When the creature discovers the boy's surname, he is filled with wrath and grief. This murder, however, is not motivated by contempt for the child, but for the creator who had rejected and loathed him. The creature feels pleasure for the first time in his miserable existence in his act of revenge. It is worth noting, however, that even after this and two more

murders, the creature still yearns for compassion from his creator. Victor persists, however, and continues to reject his creation, eventually embarking on a crusade to destroy it, succeeding only in destroying himself. Victor and the creature's reactions to one another can be read as a warning of sorts. Feelings of loathing and disgust toward their newborn infants are a sad reality for many women; left unaddressed, these feelings can lead to mutual destruction. Sometimes this mutual destruction is literal, and other times it manifests in guilt and bitterness in the mother, and resentment and hostility in the child.

Mary Shelley would not have had the proper terminology for the phenomenon of maternal rejection. The picture that we find in this examination of her novel, however, clearly illustrates what we today we recognize as postpartum depression. We are acutely aware of the dire consequences that can result from this condition, through highly publicized cases in which a mother kills her children (and sometimes herself as well), and we know how to take preventative steps to keep a mother from harming herself or her child, although we continue to miss the symptoms in many cases. New mothers do not expect such adverse reactions to their infants, just as Victor did not expect that he would abhor his creature. Our expectations of motherhood tell us nothing of this disturbing phenomenon. Feminist writer Barbara Johnson observes, "The idea that a mother can loathe, fear, and reject her baby has until recently been one of the most repressed of psychoanalytic insights."¹⁷ She goes on to argue that we may be justified in reading *Frankenstein* as an autobiographical novel, because "[h]aving lived through an unwanted pregnancy from a man married to someone else only to see that baby die, followed by a second baby named William – which is the name of the Monster's first murder victim –

Mary Shelley, at the age of only eighteen, must have had excruciatingly divided emotions.”¹⁸

Even if we do not read *Frankenstein* as an autobiographical novel, we can nonetheless examine the philosophical picture of motherhood it projects. If we take Victor’s creative activity and its culmination as a metaphor for the reality that many women are faced with after labor and delivery, then we find a picture of motherhood that blatantly contradicts the ideal picture presented in the figure of Catherine Beaufort, which we can reasonably say is a commonly accepted – and *expected* – image. The attitudes and emotions that accompany motherhood are more varied and complex than the idyllic image allows. Under its constraints, women must deny any adverse feelings or doubts they may have about themselves or their child. They are not supposed to feel badly about motherhood. Their life as a mother should be as picturesque as Caroline Beaufort, even if the sacrifices they must make lead to their deaths; at least, that is the myth. The philosophical picture of motherhood that we find in the gaps of *Frankenstein* points to a reality that goes largely ignored in philosophical discourse. It reveals that the common ideal of motherhood projects an image that is contrary to the experiences of real women. It is, like Victor’s archetypal mother, an image of ‘more than woman.’

NOTES:

¹ Although my focus here is on novels in the nineteenth century, my general argument can be extended to novels by women authors in other periods as well.

² Catherine Villanueva Gardner argues for a view similar to this in her book, Rediscovering Women Philosophers: Philosophical Genre and the Boundaries of Philosophy, (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000). In particular, see Chapter 5, “George Eliot and How to Read Novels Philosophically,” 123-148.

³ Wolfgang Iser, “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,” New Literary History 3, no. 2, Winter, (1972): 280.

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of reader response to gaps in literary texts, see Iser, 285.

⁵ The gathering in which Mary Shelley conceived the idea for *Frankenstein* was even dramatized, albeit quite liberally and with excessive absurdity, in Ken Russell’s 1987 horror film, *Gothic*.

⁶ Wendy Lesser, “Introduction,” in Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus, Mary Shelley, (New York: Knopf, 1921, 1992), v.

⁷ Mary Shelley, Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus, (New York: Knopf, 1921), p.2. In the 1831 preface, Mary writes that to her remembrance, her husband wrote the entire 1818 preface (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1999), xi. It is unclear what influence Mary may have had on its content.

⁸ The novel’s subtitle, “The Modern Prometheus,” portends the events in the novel. In Ancient Greek myth, Prometheus created human being out of clay, and later gave them

the gift of fire, which consumes and destroys. “Prometheus” thus suggests that creation coupled with inhuman (godlike) technology breeds destruction.

⁹ Shelley, 22.

¹⁰ Ibid., 23.

¹¹ Ibid., 35.

¹² Many literary critics have indeed explored the obvious parallel between Victor’s creation of the monster and the traditional theistic creation story. I have adopted instead a feminist interpretation for my present project. For additional reading on Frankenstein as a “birth myth,” see Ellen Moers, Literary Women, (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 95-97.

¹³ Shelley, 31.

¹⁴ Ibid., 44.

¹⁵ Ibid., 50.

¹⁶ Ibid., 50.

¹⁷ Barbara Johnson, “My Monster/My Self,” Diacritics 12 no. 2, Summer (1982), 6.

¹⁸ Ibid, 6.

III. Feminist Cinema as Alternative Philosophical Genre: Marleen Gorris' A

Question of Silence

By the late twentieth century, contributions to the philosophy profession by women increased more than in any preceding period, and even now the number continues to grow.¹ Thus, it may seem unnecessary in this present day to stray from traditional genres in order to access contemporary women's philosophical thought. 'Legitimate' philosophical writings by women are more readily available to us, and so one may conclude that we no longer need to look toward alternative genres. I maintain that it would be detrimental to adopt such a position. If there is value to be found in examining alternative genres in earlier historical periods, which I believe the preceding two sections have demonstrated, then certainly there is value in continuing the exploration with modern alternative genres. As with personal correspondence in the Early Modern period and novels in the nineteenth century, feminist cinema in the twentieth century is a potentially rich area through which to explore the non-traditional philosophical contributions of women. Feminist cinema (indeed, cinema in general) shares many elements in common with the novel; thus, our approach to a particular film may be similar to our approach to a novel. For example, films present to us the familiar elements of character, plot, and setting, all of which are immediately available for analysis. Films have certain formal features, however, that set them apart from the novel form and that provide us with additional avenues for philosophical analysis.

One important difference is that the influence and intentions of a film's creator are far more explicit in a film than are the author's in a novel. I posited earlier with regard to the novel that we can gain some idea of an author's intent by examining the

way she deliberately develops her characters, presents settings, and frames her narrative. With cinema, we can do the same; however, a director's influence is also evident in the ways in which she shoots and edits her film. A director controls the visual aspect of every scene and in the editing process constructs her film into a single, purposive whole. That is not to say that every film is complete and coherent; like novels, films often leave gaps in their narrative, temporal, and/or visual structure through which the viewer can participate in constructing a film's meaning. The editorial decisions of a director, however, leave the director's indelible mark on the film and guide the viewer's understanding of the work. Given the importance of a director's editorial decisions, we must consider the literary elements of a film together with its formal visual elements. I shall focus my present discussion on one formal element in particular: montage, which "refers to the expressive use of editing to confer symbolic and metaphorical meanings onto the filmed events."² Formal decisions complement a film's literary aspects and enable the viewer to construct his or her own interpretation of a film's meaning within the framework the director has purposively laid out. Thus, once more we are dealing with a genre that differs significantly from traditional philosophical genres in that films do not present premises and conclusions for us to consider; instead, we can examine a film's formal and literary content to uncover philosophical pictures that may broaden our resources for discovering the philosophical activities of women. For this purpose, I have chosen to take a philosophical look at Marleen Gorris' 1983 film, *A Question of Silence*.

A Question of Silence takes us through the stories of four women who are joined together after three of the women brutally murder the owner of a prestigious boutique by bludgeoning him to death with kicks, a shopping cart, broken hangers and glass, and

other heavy, blunt objects. The fourth woman, a psychiatrist, is hired by the state to evaluate the women's mental condition in order to determine whether or not they can be held responsible for their actions. Her report, she is told, will strongly influence the sentencing of the three women. On the surface, the story is 'about' a horrific murder; however, a close analysis reveals the deeper meaning of the film: it is a story about women. Specifically, Gorriss uses the events leading up to and following the murder to illustrate an important feature in the lived experiences of being a woman in a male-dominated, oppressive society. Each of the women in the film leads a vastly different life. Christine Molenaar, one of the accused, is married to a civil servant and is a stay-at-home mother of three young children. The second woman, Ann Jongman, has been divorced for ten years, has an adult daughter, and works as a waitress in a greasy diner. Andrea Jannie, the third woman who participated in the murder, works as a secretary and, to her mother's extreme chagrin, has never been married. The psychiatrist, Jeanine Van den Bos, has earned acclaim in her profession and is in a healthy, satisfying marriage with a successful attorney. It is difficult to see what these women share in common, but as the story progresses we begin to realize that they share an experience of silence in their world. Their voices clamor to be heard, but to no avail. The sobering picture that emerges in the film is that women are silenced in society and their work is ineffectual, even though women are often deceived into believing otherwise. Because of the patriarchal structure of society, Gorriss seems to suggest, there is nothing women can do from within the confines of the patriarchal structure to be heard; they must create their own community from which to derive their power, so that their voices will be an effectual and resounding challenge to the patriarchal status quo. Let us take a look at the specific

narrative events in the film and how they are portrayed to see how Gorriss creates this controversial picture of feminine rebellion.

Before we learn anything of the murder, Gorriss introduces us to the primary characters in environments that typify their experiences as women. We first meet Dr. Jeanine Van den Bos in an intimate setting at home with her husband. He sits on the couch absorbed in his work, as she initiates sexual foreplay. After several failed attempts to get his attention, she draws a pen into the air and brings it swiftly down to his chest and traces a line down his abdomen. Her action resembles a violent stabbing and gutting motion that is decidedly *unsexual*. He, however, finally responds to her advances. A viewer may justifiably interpret her action as an indication that the same capacity for violent rebellion exists in Jeanine as exists in the other women. In contrast to Jeanine's relatively blissful domestic life, Gorriss cuts to Christine sitting in her darkened living room watching television, absent-mindedly munching on a snack, while her youngest child plays in a playpen. Clutter litters the room, but Christine neither minds nor notices. She rises to get the baby out of the playpen and her snack slides from her lap to the floor. Again, she does not mind or notice. Christine is strangely detached from her surroundings; she goes through the motions of her life without ever being an active participant. Through the entire scene, Christine never utters a word. Thus, we see in the former character a woman who is active and assertive, aggressively pursuing her desires. In the latter, we see a woman whose life happens around her; she is passive and disconnected, almost to the degree of automaton. Their differences are highlighted through Gorriss' use of montage to juxtapose scenes from their daily lives.

Gorris' introduction of Ann and Andrea is similarly contrastive, and she uses the same montage editing to juxtapose scenes of the two women in their work environment. Ann is constantly on her feet, taking and filling orders for a diner full of male customers. She endures frequent sexual innuendo and derogatory comments against women from the male patrons, often matching their crude conversation with her own brash comments. When the men see that Ann is offended by a particularly lewd comment, they chide her not to be so sensitive. Ann's loud, boisterous demeanor endears her to the diner's male clientele, but her assertiveness does not engender respect from them; they merely continue in like manner without understanding the inappropriateness of their behavior. In our first encounter with Andrea, we see an equally present but markedly distinct form of sex discrimination. Andrea works as an administrative secretary for a multinational corporation. She sits in her (male) boss's office and takes dictation. Her boss asks her about some details concerning one of their operations, and she relays the information from memory, complete with detailed statistics. Her boss, however, is not the least impressed with her knowledge about business; he values her for her organizational skills and typing speed. Her intellectual ability goes unnoticed and unrewarded, because in his mind she is just the secretary and will never be more than that. Any career ambitions she might entertain are thwarted by her company's stiflingly low glass ceiling. Andrea is clearly articulate and intelligent, but she seems resigned to her assignment in a mediocre job. She and Ann are as different from each other as they are from Jeanine and Christine. Having established the enormously different backgrounds of her four main characters through creative juxtaposition, Gorris thus begins her project of uniting the women through the discovery of their common oppression.

Gorris invites us at various times to see the world from the perspective of each of the four women, through frequent flashbacks and creative editing, but primarily we experience the film's events along with Jeanine. For my purposes here, I shall focus primarily on Jeanine's character as well, since I believe that her development is a journey of arriving at a critical consciousness regarding the oppression of women. Her story, in effect, best illustrates the predominant philosophical picture the film produces. Jeanine, recall, is hired to determine the sanity (or insanity) of the murderers. Jeanine receives the initial call one afternoon while she and her husband are entertaining friends. Her husband appears in the foreground discussing his views on social hegemony; Jeanine, sitting in the background, offers a clarification of her husband's opinion, since he appears to be having difficulty expressing himself clearly. As Jeanine takes the foreground, he begrudgingly affirms that she is somewhat right and tells her to have another sherry. The phone rings, and we hear her husband tell the caller, "No, my wife is the doctor, I'll go get her."³ 'Naturally,' the caller assumes the man is the doctor. Later, when Jeanine arrives at the prison to interview the other women, Jeanine runs into a male acquaintance who comments, "I assume you usually get assigned to women," implying the unlikelihood that a female psychiatrist would be able to treat a male patient.⁴ Showing only a little annoyance, Jeanine nods. He continues his uninformed tirade, telling Jeanine that her job should be easy, since psychopaths like these can be identified immediately. Jeanine quickly discovers, however, that her job is not easy, because this case is unlike any other case she has ever had.

Jeanine thus begins a series of interviews with each of the three women. She tape-records each session so that she will be able to "remember all the important

details.”⁵ Her sessions with Christine are frustrating for Jeanine, because Christine refuses to speak. Her sessions with Ann are only slightly better, because Ann wants to talk about everything but the murder. She offers some factual details, but quickly changes the subject and laughs heartily at Jeanine’s naïveté about the world. Jeanine discovers nothing that would point to a motive for the murder. Andrea, however, is brutally honest with Jeanine. Jeanine discovers that the women did not seek to kill the boutique owner in particular; Andrea tells her that it could have been any man. “Could it have been a woman?” Jeanine wonders; Andrea flatly responds, “No.”⁶ Andrea seems unable to explain why their victim could not have been a woman. Jeanine presses her for an answer and tries to emphasize the importance of her report, to which Andrea informs Jeanine that her report is insignificant and will influence nothing. Jeanine replays the interviews at home, the scene shifting from Jeanine’s home office to flashbacks of the sessions she is listening to on the tapes, and the lives of the three women begin to consume her thoughts. She doesn’t understand how three *normal* women could have committed so brutal a crime. However, the more she learns about their lives, the more convinced she becomes that the women are not insane.

The key to understanding Jeanine’s struggle, I believe, is to provide an instinctual answer to the central question of how normal women could do such an atrocious thing. The answer is *they wouldn’t*. Of course normal women would not murder a man they do not know, having no good reason to do so. They *must* be insane to do such a thing. Or so we are inclined to think. The male characters in the film adopt the same instinctual presumption of insanity. Jeanine’s husband, for example, judges that the women must be insane, based on the photographs of the body Jeanine shows him. He doesn’t understand

how anyone could judge otherwise. Jeanine draws an unexpected parallel, however, likening the women's mutilation of the shop owner to an atrocity of war. Her husband appears horrified that Jeanine would make such a connection and insists that the two are not the same. Jeanine is also convinced (rightly) that there were other women present in the boutique at the time of the murder and that Christine, Ann, and Andrea are lying when they say the shop was empty. Her husband claims it is impossible that other women were there, because if they were they would have reported the crime or tried to stop it. Again, one might think so. But Jeanine, perhaps coming to some understanding, mutters, "Yes...I wonder."⁷ Here I believe that Gorriss is inviting us to entertain the possibility that the women's crime and war atrocities do have something in common. Christine, Ann, and Andrea are at war, in a sense. They are fighting an oppressive patriarchal system that keeps them subordinated to men, keeps them portrayed as sexual objects, keeps them, in effect, silent. There is a war that does not involve themselves alone, but Jeanine as well. The presence of other women in the store suggests that the war involves all women in patriarchal societies. In wartime, even the most normal, sane women – just like normal, sane men – could be capable of committing terrible atrocities.

During Jeanine's progression in her sessions with the women, we can see a sort of awakening begin as she becomes convinced of the women's sanity and of her own naïveté. Frustrated by Christine's continued silence, she appeals to the other two women for answers. Andrea calls Christine's silence "brave," and Ann poses the following rhetorical question: "Do you ever wonder why Christine stopped talking? No one was listening."⁸ Andrea and Ann both realize from the beginning what Jeanine is only just coming to understand – Christine's silence is not a post-traumatic catatonic response to

the crime she commits; it is a voluntary choice she makes in response to a lifetime of not being heard. Her choice is made long before she commits murder. Jeanine still struggles with the knowledge that three women, with widely differing backgrounds, who did not know each other prior to the fateful day in the boutique, in the presence of other (female) witnesses who in turn remain silent, could willfully and *sanely* kill a man. She plays and replays her cassette tapes; she hears herself ask Ann if she ever considered marrying again, followed by Ann's boisterous laughter. "You really don't understand people – especially not women," Ann observes.⁹ Jeanine later asks Andrea:

- What will happen to you? Will anyone think you're not crazy?

- Yes.

- Who?

- Women.¹⁰

Jeanine's awakening is a gradual process, as she begins to realize her own secondary place in a patriarchal society. Her husband, for example, places his career interests above her own personal and professional needs. The caller who informed her of the women's case automatically assumed that her husband was the doctor. The acquaintance she met at the prison assumes her professional skills are best applied to women. Moreover, her professional opinion that the women are not insane is constantly called into question by (male) laypeople. Gorris develops a dream sequence in which these images along with images of the murder victim's body and pieces of her sessions with the women cross the screen at a dizzying pace; Jeanine wakes up dazed and in a cold sweat. She finally understands the oppressive predicament of women.

By the time she presents her report before the court Jeanine is resolved. The camera pans the gallery; the four women who were present in the boutique the day of the murder are present this day in the court. The camera pauses briefly on each woman, and Jeanine realizes who the women are. After a string of men testify, Jeanine presents her report. She announces, “I can reach no other conclusion than that the three women are completely sound of mind.”¹¹ The judge urges her to think in terms of a ‘tentative diagnosis’ and stresses the influence her report will have in the sentencing process. The camera cuts to Christine as she giggles, and we immediately understand both her voluntary silence and Andrea’s prior assessment of the value of Jeanine’s report. The prosecutor aggressively and repeatedly tries to sway Jeanine from her diagnosis, but to no avail. Jeanine suggests that the prosecution has not taken into account that this was a crime committed by three women against a man. She tries to elaborate, but the prosecutor cuts her off with perhaps the most suggestive punch line of the film. He states that there is no difference between this crime and one in which three men murder a woman. Ann bursts out in a fit of laughter, the camera pans back across the gallery to capture first one woman, and then another, and then all the women joining Ann’s burst of laughter. The women understand the difference, even if the prosecutor does not. All of the women are ushered out of the courtroom, still laughing, and the judge declares that “the case will go on in the absence of the defendants.”¹²

I have suggested in the preceding description of the narrative events and cinematographic techniques employed by Gorris some features of the philosophical picture that emerges in this film, most notably that women are engaged in a war against the oppressive structure of patriarchal societies. Gorris highlights this oppression by

juxtaposing scenes from the women's daily lives with scenes from their lives in the prison – little changes for the women between the two settings. We can see likewise the same elements of oppression through the juxtaposition of Jeanine's experiences with those of the other women. Additionally, Christine's voluntary silence speaks volumes about the silencing women experience in society. In the film, this is most clearly seen in the courtroom display when Jeanine gives her report. The court will not accept her conclusion, and both the judge and the prosecutor attempt to persuade her to change her report. Anneke Smelik points out that the easiest way out for the court "is to condemn the women as 'insane,' but after her long investigation and growing rapport with the three murderesses, the psychiatrist...declares them sane. The court now has to actually think about the meaning of the act, which is something it cannot or will not do."¹³ We are faced once again with the question of why the women would commit the crime, if not for reason of insanity. Smelik asserts that "the women have no motive in the conventional sense, but that the murder is the indirect outcome of years of humiliation and objectification...it metaphorically stands for women's outrage at and resistance to masculinist society."¹⁴ Smelik's assessment confirms that the predominant philosophical picture the film projects is one in which women are at war with a male-dominated, oppressive society. Thus, the film is not 'about' a murder at all. It is about the oppression of women and the avenues women have for resistance to oppression. The philosophical picture Gorriz creates suggests that women cannot mount an effective resistance from within the structures of patriarchal society. The bond among the women in the film show us that women must unite to form their own community in which their

voices will not go unheard so that no case will go on in the absence of the defendants.

Surely, this picture of feminine rebellion merits serious philosophical attention.

NOTES:

¹ The number of women to men in the philosophy profession remains far from equal, however. A 1995 report by Linda Ingram and Prudence Brown found that “[a]mong all the fields in the humanities – History, Art History, Music, Philosophy, English/American Language/Literature, Classics, Modern Language/Literature and Other (including Linguistics, American Studies, etc.) – Philosophy was the most disproportionately male. Of the 8300 Ph.D.’s, 82.6% were male and 17.4% female.” Reported in the American Philosophical Association’s Data on the Profession, <http://www.apa.udel.edu/apa/profession/selected.html>, copyright 2000, The American Philosophical Association, last revised August 28, 2001. Accessed April 12, 2005, data taken from Ingram and Brown’s *Humanities Doctorates in the United States: 1995 Profile*, (Washington D.C.: National Academy Press, 1997); the report gives the results of data collected in the 1995 Survey of Humanities Doctorates sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and conducted by the National Research Council.

² Warren Buckland, Teach Yourself Film Studies, (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 2003), 25.

³ Marleen Gorris, *A Question of Silence*, Dir. by Marleen Gorris, 92 min., Quartet/Films Incorporated – Sigma Films Limited, 1983.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Gorris, *A Question of Silence*.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Anneke Smelik, And the Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 103-104.

¹⁴ Ibid., 96.

Conclusion

I have argued that given the near absence of women's voices in the history of philosophy it is incumbent upon contemporary philosophers to seek out places where women *are* speaking to find traces of women's philosophical thought. Since a larger number of women participated in alternative genres that are not traditionally considered 'philosophical,' alternative genres are an obvious starting point for the exploration. I have offered personal correspondence in the Early Modern period, novels in the nineteenth century, and feminist cinema in the twentieth century as examples of alternative genres and have considered in detail three examples within each genre. I do not propose, however, that these are the only genres worth investigating. We might also look at personal diaries, journalistic writing, pamphlets, or any number of other genres in which women participated. My purpose for this investigation into alternative genres is to demonstrate that we can do 'legitimate' philosophical work outside the boundaries of traditional philosophical genres and to show that such work is perhaps the best way to access women's philosophical thought that would otherwise be absent from historical philosophical discourse.

It may be objected that the work I have done here bears little resemblance to 'legitimate' philosophical work; that it has more the appearance of historical writing, in the case of Princess Elisabeth's personal correspondence; or literary criticism, in the case of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; or film theory, in the case of Marleen Gorris' *A Question of Silence*. Indeed, these other disciplinary styles do have an effect on the manner in which one writes about genres closely affiliated with those styles. Such a resemblance is to be expected, however, and should not form the basis for a summary

dismissal of the possibility for doing philosophical work in alternative genres. Inasmuch as alternative genres themselves do not conform to traditional philosophical genres, we should not be surprised to find that analyses of alternative genres likewise do not conform to the style of traditional philosophical analyses. A mere deviation in style, however, does not entail that the exploration and analysis of alternative genres should fall outside the domain of philosophy. One might also object that we cannot do philosophical work in alternative genres such as these, because philosophical work at its core involves explicit argumentation – a feature alternative genres lack. This criticism is a more serious challenge than the former; however, I believe we can answer its *prima facie* concern. It is true that, generally speaking, alternative genres do not lay out neatly a set of premises and conclusions, although we may occasionally find sketches of a well thought out argument, as in Princess Elisabeth's correspondence with Descartes. In creative writing, however, we can discover particular philosophical pictures that give us grounds to question a received opinion about some state of the world, as in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, or that make some assertion about the world, as in Gorriss' *A Question of Silence*. In the former case, we can analyze the philosophical picture to see if the grounds we are given to question a received opinion are plausible when we look at our actual experiences in the world. In the latter, we can again compare our actual experiences to whatever assertion is being made about the world to analyze whether or not it is a plausible portrayal. Analyzed in this manner, the investigation of alternative genres begins to look remarkably like 'legitimate' philosophy.

I would like to reiterate that I have not argued that alternative genres should take the place of traditional philosophical genres. Traditional philosophical genres, indeed,

have enormous value for philosophical work. They help us to clarify ideas, explore new theories, and reevaluate entrenched beliefs. Because of their form, traditional philosophical genres may be the most straightforward way to approach philosophical problems. The premise of this paper, though, is that they are not the *only* way. By limiting our philosophical work to traditional genres, we automatically exclude women thinkers from our historical investigations. Even when we are working with contemporary philosophy, the work of women still comprises a small portion of the total philosophical repertory. I have maintained throughout this paper that we cannot avoid doing philosophical work in alternative genres if we have any serious intention of locating and assessing the work of our philosophical foremothers. We need not devalue traditional philosophical genres in the process; however, we should not allow our affinity for traditional genres to devalue the philosophical work women have done in alternative genres. I believe that if we pay attention both to traditional and to alternative genres, we will be able to develop a broader philosophical framework that more equitably represents both women and men.

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