

OLD MAIDS TO RADICAL SPINSTERS

*Unmarried Women in
the Twentieth-Century Novel*

EDITED BY

Laura L. Doan

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Nina Auerbach

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NINA AUERBACH

Foreword

One question recurs unexpectedly in this collection: with all the supposed freedoms the twentieth century has given women, does the old maid continue to exist? If she doesn't, and we are glad to see her go, why write about old maids in the twentieth century?

A decade ago, I would probably have answered, "There are no more old maids, thank God." At that time I was outlining what may have been my most personal work of scholarship, the chapter "Old Maids and the Wish for Wings" in *Woman and the Demon*, my account of female subversion in Victorian England. I loved writing "Old Maids and the Wish for Wings" because it redeemed the humiliations of the past; it seemed, however, only metaphorically related to the lives of twentieth-century women. After all, women like me no longer had to be maids.

Victorian spinsters were defined by what they could not have. Work and love, those two engrossing components of adult life, were forbidden or allowed only second hand. For the respectable middle-class women who lived out the stereotype of the old maid, allowable work was limited to ill-paid dithering around the fringes of the service professions, while love meant meeting uncomplainingly the demands of aging parents or siblings' children; attachments outside family and, of course, any assertion of sexuality were tabooed. The conservative essayist W. R. Greg, who was given to rhetorical cries of horror at the very existence of spinsters, wrote of their lives as "wretched and deteriorating, their minds narrowing and their hearts withering, because they have nothing to do, and none to love, cherish, and obey."¹

But Victorian taboos, not the unmarried condition, guaranteed that spinsters would have "nothing to do, and none to love." Inflexible prohibitions defused the Victorian spinster's acute challenge to the family and to the ideology of womanhood which rigidly defined life in terms of family relationships. I wrote in *Woman and the Demon* about the threat of women who were mobile, self-defined, free to establish their own boundaries; beneath the social straitjacketing, the spinster was regarded, even by respectable Victorians, as a disturbingly commanding figure precisely because she evaded family definition. Potentially at least she was an authentic hero.

In revenge against her power, the appellation "old maid" forced on her the most horrible attributes of youth and age: "maid" turns her into a perpetual virgin and humble servant, while "old" mocks the grotesquerie of her preadult status. An old maid is not merely a servile creature out of nature; the long middle of life, the phase in which most of us *make* our lives, is amputated so that there is only a beginning yoked to an end.

Most of us believe gratefully that the twentieth century allows even unconforming women to grow into the shape we choose. In a seemingly flexible age of many available communities as alternatives to families, of commuting couples, of first, second, and third marriages, of unofficial but intensely monogamous live-in love affairs, and of rights to privacy and emotional fluidity we take for granted, most adult women are, in an essential sense, old maids for some of their lives. We no longer need to be absorbed into a marriage to authorize us. Marriage does not own women in the twentieth century. It does not give us love and work; these, we assume, are our birthrights.

Moreover, technology has saved us from what must have been the terrible silence of the Victorian spinster's life. When I was writing "Old Maids and the Wish for Wings," I tried to imagine not only the sexual and professional prohibitions that forced dependency, boredom, and loneliness on obedient old maids but also what it would be like to live alone without telephones, radios, televisions, and VCRs. I could envision it only in dreadful flashes. I always write alone in my apartment, with music playing in the background and my answering machine turned on. At times, I hear the phone ring faintly over the clicking keys and the string quartet; a friend's voice wafts into my study leaving an elaborate, urgent message. After writing my quota, I regain connectedness by returning whatever calls have come in; then I wind down by inviting a group of actors into my home on the VCR. I cannot imagine settling into solitude without those accompanying, comforting noises. Writing "Old Maids and the Wish for Wings," though, I realized that for a Victorian woman living alone, there were no voices, much less voices that could be turned on and off at will. In that perpetual silence, I wondered, how could she write? But of course she could not, under any conditions, write *Woman and the Demon*. No university would support such a book, no archive would let her in, and, most important, no publisher would consider a book called *Woman and the Demon* unless a man had written it.

There were, I was sure, no old maids in the twentieth century; I was convinced then (and I am still) that we shape ourselves to whatever lives social mores permit us to live. Our lives were, or could be, animated by voices, challenging work, and chosen relationships that didn't need to adapt to set formulas. There was no longer, it seemed, a monolithic society that feared unmarried women and thus tried to stunt them. The Victorian old maid, after all, was forced into deprivation so that her life would not be attractive enough to tempt young women and threaten the family. In his phobic essay, "Why Are Women Redundant?," W. R. Greg prophetically defines the reforms he is trying to prevent:

To endeavor to make women independent of men; to multiply and facilitate their employments; to enable them to earn a separate and ample subsistence by competing with the hardier sex in those careers and occupations hitherto set apart for that sex alone; to induct them generally into avocations, not only as interesting and beneficent, and therefore *appropriate*, but specially and definitely as *lucrative*; to surround single life for them with so smooth an entrance, and such a pleasant, ornamented, comfortable path, that marriage shall almost come to be regarded, not as their most honorable function and especial calling, but merely as one of many ways open to them, competing on equal terms with other ways for their cold and philosophic choice. . . . ²

These reforms, he goes on to say, are a dreadful mistake, for they legitimize inherently unnatural lives. But Greg's fears have come true, while his supposedly "natural" solution to the "problem" of old maids—enforced colonial emigration—has become a Victorian bogey we laugh at. Ten years ago, essayists like Greg seemed too benighted to worry about. When I first wrote about old maids, I was sure that unmarried women were now normalized despite ourselves. We were no longer burned as witches. We were allowed to fit in.

Times have changed, and I suppose I have too. Living through a decade feminists are optimistically calling a backlash, hearing politicians (and even some of my friends) trumpet in quite W. R. Gregish fashion the sanctity and exclusive right to happiness of married life, and reading this collection of invigorating essays, I realize that while the pinched life of the Victorian old maid can never return, the old maid herself is a social construction (and frequent scapegoat) we will need for at least as long as there are families. She may still, like her Victorian progenitors, gain approval by sighing plain-

tively on cue at her deprivations, but underneath her trappings of servitude and sacrifice, she evokes, as she did in the nineteenth century, an open, Odyssean destiny that family life cannot give and an identity that is self-created and self-possessed. The old maids of Muriel Spark, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Barbara Pym, and the other authors covered in this collection are by no means isolates, but they *are* self-defined. They can and do love, but they do not use other people to tell themselves and the world who they are.

One movie on my VCR this month was the amazingly popular *Fatal Attraction* (1988). I hated it, but it did remind me that the old maid is not yet obsolete; perhaps she never was and should never be. I prefer to *Fatal Attraction* the more robust masochism of Bette Davis playing old maids in the 1940s, but we have supposedly put behind us those smoldering women who have nothing to do but suffer. Glenn Close is the old maid ferociously modernized, and like all the greedy children of the 1980s she apparently has it all.

She is, to begin with, neither old nor a maid. She is an improbably gorgeous thirty-six, evilly seductive but fretting forlornly about her biological clock. Unlike the Victorian old maid, she is aggressively sexual, but the movie assures us that sex for her is no more than unnatural lust; she has a lovely big bed she scarcely uses, preferring to seduce the movie's feebly married hero in a cage-like elevator or a sink full of dirty dishes.

Her work is what we usually call "interesting"—she is an editor in a publishing house—and her job must be lucrative enough to have horrified W. R. Greg, because she wears good clothes, buys good furniture, and looks enviably expensive. As we see her, though, she never goes to work (she is too busy hovering wretchedly around the hero's family), and her nicely furnished apartment is set in Hell (no one else lives on her street; we see only diabolical workmen who pack animal carcasses while smoke and flames belch out from a mysterious source). Moreover, she has all the appliances designed to connect her to the outside world, but these only feed her mad isolation. She listens to nothing on her stereo except *Madame Butterfly*, so that she can identify with a betrayed heroine who was quaintly retrograde even in her time. Her phone never rings, so she doesn't need an answering machine; the phone has no communicative value, existing only to feed her obsession with a hero she telephones over and over while he tries to escape from her into his family.

In fact nothing in her life does what it is designed to do. All her apparent advantages—glamour, career, money, sex, technology—are discredited as soon as they appear. Her life has only one objective, the same one any nineteenth-century patriarch would assign to the old maid: prowling miserably around the fringes of a family as sanctified and as boring as any Victorian would endorse. Because this apparently modern woman is so evocative of the spectral old maid of the last century, the movie clothes her in virginal white. She puts on a black coat only when she is doing something especially evil to the holy family. Gorgeous, successful, sophisticated, steamingly sexy, Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction* wears clothes that say she is still waiting at the altar and still, in some sense, a virgin. Sex only “counts,” it seems, within the pastoral family, not in a city where there are dirty dishes under you and meatpackers outside.

Fatal Attraction forces feminists who came of age in the 1970s to recognize the changes in popular culture that signal ominously changing times, but it may represent something more hopeful than simply a new conservatism about women and sexual relationships. The movie’s terrified belief in its old maid as a maelstrom of sexuality who is able to destroy a cozy but torpid family—a family valued mainly as a sanctuary against the passions of the world outside—may revive our own belief in the old maid’s power. Many of us may have become too sanguine about our ability to blend in; perhaps we were too complacently eager to do so. *Fatal Attraction* and its ilk should remind even women who hate it that we *have* set ourselves outside conventional norms and that our most vibrant role is that of the outsider.

Feminist criticism itself has been feeling its age lately, preening itself on token victories. The old maid in *Fatal Attraction*, a witch-like destroyer of the snug family that excludes her, may be more galvanizing than the nurturing angel of some recent feminist work. Carol Gilligan’s influential *In a Different Voice* is, in its own way, as symptomatic of the conservatism of the 1980s as the spinster/monster of *Fatal Attraction* is. Gilligan maintains that women are by nature more concerned than men with relationships, with “taking care.” She relies on such authorities as eleven-year-old “Amy” and “Jake,” who chatter on predictably. Here is “Amy”: “Well, like some people put themselves and things for themselves before they put other people, and some people really care about other people. Like, I don’t think your job is as important as somebody that you really love, like your husband or your parents or a very close friend.”³ In an adjacent column, “Jake” holds forth conveniently about sports and fair-

ness and atom bombs and success in school and all those other things women are too busy relating to care about.

Some female readers may fear that the "different voice" Gilligan assigns them is the only voice available; like good Victorian women, they are learning who they are only through their relationship to others, and like Victorian women too, they are told that selfless relating is natural to women. Belief in the paradigm of the old maid as a self-determined woman is a salutary check to Gilligan's altruistic paragon, who evolves too easily from a liberating to an enforced identity. The old maid in *Fatal Attraction* is a cautionary monster of solitude, but her solitude may be a galvanizing if extreme antidote to too much acceptability. *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters* reminds us that acceptability is only a partial virtue; it may be time to exercise our resistance. Moreover, this anthology reminds us that twentieth-century writers have seen the old maid as a far friendlier, more welcoming, figure than recent conservative works allow us to believe is possible.

The great strength of these essays lies in their diversity. They differ as dramatically, in their methods and subjects, as women do from each other. What unifies them is their belief in the fundamentally deviant figure of the old maid and in the power—and satisfactions—of deviance itself. These rich essays do more than present a series of positive role models, though they do remind us of a fact most women know, but few admit: living alone is fun and often a great nourisher of relationships. These essays do more than hold up individual old maids, in and out of novels, for our admiration. They show a salutary belief in the old maid as a durable (if mutable) and healthy human type. She has made fundamental refusals, but negations and refusals do not define her. Because she lives in opposition to accepted norms, she does not have to make herself acceptable to live. Her opposition is at best flexible and friendly. The figure who emerges from this collection is somewhere between the exemplar of acceptability many of us once thought we were and the witch-like destroyer with which *Fatal Attraction* tries to frighten us. The old maid of Doan's anthology lives in a tolerant, sometimes tender truce with the society that wants to stigmatize her.

The great strength of these essays collectively is their awareness that individuals change as society does. There might always be old maids, but the old maid today is not the impoverished figure of the nineteenth century or the overanalyzed, complex-ridden figure she was turned into in the 1950s. Perennial as a type, she is, as a literary figure, intensely fluid. Judy Little's wonderful essay on Muriel

Spark shows how Spark's spinsters evolve over time. Jean Brodie, probably a frightening model for many of us who teach, is, in Little's brilliant analysis, a monster-martyr of the 1930s who, in another decade, might be neither betrayed nor self-betrayed. Little shows how Muriel Spark's acceptance of the spinsters who had always haunted her imagination changed as her times did; Sybil Oldfield shows the same evolution in Virginia Woolf's spinsters, and Joan Kirkby finds a similar development in Elizabeth Jolley. These sensitive readings reveal three woman writers for whom the old maid is a demonic muse they can begin to embrace when society begins to relax its taboos.

Old maids will continue to be dynamic presences in our literature and our culture, but there has never been one essential old maid, and there never will be. Just as she becomes a warmer, stronger figure in the later novels of Muriel Spark, Virginia Woolf, and Elizabeth Jolley, so she will, I hope, show her many sorts of warmth and strength as social mores warm toward her. Probably she will never join the ranks of the respectable, but as she is more freely understood, she will be freer to share the wisdom of her refusals. *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters* is an inspiring act of understanding that should free readers of all sorts to embrace an often-forbidden muse.

NOTES

1. W. R. Greg, "Why are Women Redundant?" 1862; rpt. in *Literary and Social Judgments* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1873) 277.
2. Greg 300.
3. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) 36.

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LAURA L. DOAN

Introduction

It may be time for feminists to circle back to those "images" of angels and demons, nuns and whores, whom it seemed so easy and so liberating to kill, in order to retrieve a less tangible, but also less restricting, facet of woman's history.

—Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*

The spinster is so enmeshed in cultural stereotyping that it is difficult to extricate her from negative connotations. Yet the label is as ambiguous as it is ambivalent. Society has deliberately deemed her pathetic to mask its fear of the unmarried woman. The image of the old-fashioned, genteel schoolmarm or the prying town gossip effectively cloaks the more dangerous threat of an autonomous woman and provokes a number of questions. How many readers can be certain, for instance, that spinsterhood implies virginity or celibacy or asexuality? Are all women without men (lesbians, widows, divorcees, nuns) to be considered spinsters? Are there racial or class (in other words, white, middle-class) boundaries involved in this category? Is the designation "spinster" essentially socioeconomic or psychosexual? Finally, can we still speak of the "old maid" or "spinster" after the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s? These questions, and others like them, are further complicated because, as we shall see, our cultural understanding of the spinster shifts to correspond to sociocultural change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Mary Daly, the radical feminist philosopher, in her scrutiny of the Merriam-Webster dictionary entries under "spinster" and "old maid," notes the implicit negative attributes such superficial definitions promote. Her critique is worth repeating in its entirety, for within her etymological review she challenges and ridicules the way the voice of authority confirms "the common contemptuous and pitying attitude toward 'spinsters'":

The first meaning given for *spinster* . . . is "a woman whose occupation is to spin." Another definition is . . . "a woman past the common age for marrying or one who seems unlikely to marry—called also *old maid*." Next comes the term *spinsterhood*, whose definition

comes right to the point: "the state or condition of being a spinster: OLD MAIDHOOD." Following this comes the term *spinsterish*, which is churlishly defined as "having the habits, appearance, or traits of a spinster: OLD-MAIDISH." In case anything should be left to the imagination, it is possible to look up *old maid*. We are informed that it means "a prim nervous person of either sex who frets over inconsequential details: FUSSBUDGET." The mendacious use of the expression "of either sex" is obvious, especially if one looks up *bachelor* and finds, of course, no reference to *old maid*, *old-maidishness*, or anything of the kind. (392-93)

Condemning what she terms the "double-double think" designed to control women's minds, Daly asserts that underneath the traditional definition lurks a "whirling dervish, spinning in a new time/space," who, like a witch, possesses tremendous and dangerous abilities to disrupt the so-called natural order (3-4). Yet in spite of Daly's rescue attempt of the words "spinster" and "old maid" to signify a positive, self-affirming image of the single woman, some readers, feminists in particular, may continue to find these terms irredeemably derogatory and insulting and hence object to their use here. Both terms have been deliberately retained—and used extensively—throughout this anthology because they are essential in delineating the transformational process that informs the larger argument. Our aim is to illustrate the transition from old maid to excellent woman, from excellent woman to a new, radical spinster.

How does this transformational process in the literary representation of the spinster intersect with historical, political, economic, and sociocultural change in the status of single women in the twentieth century? Our concern is with the spinster—a category of women not always easily subsumed by the phrase "single woman." By specifying spinster *per se*, as opposed to the single woman in general, we wish to denote a highly particularized entity, emerging from a complex set of historical circumstances, with a defined relationship to a particular class, race, and so forth. We do not in any way claim to examine the experience of all single, independent women in this period, pretending that their experience is monolithic for all decades and for all countries. The specific interest in the way certain writers work and rework the spinster stereotype—rather than the more general fictional treatment of the single woman—defines and confines the context.

Three important studies by contemporary feminist historians carefully document the political and social changes affecting independent women in Britain and America: Martha Vicinus's *Indepen-*

dent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920 (1985), Sheila Jeffreys's *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880–1930* (1985), and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (1985) (though not dealing primarily with the single woman, one chapter is devoted entirely to the subject of the New Woman, "The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870–1936"). A clearer definition of what constitutes "spinsterliness" emerges in these writings, and a brief review of their conclusions offers the sociohistorical contextualization necessary to understand whether or not the spinster's appearance in fiction heralds or responds to change.

Vicinus, Jeffreys, and Smith-Rosenberg all limit their discussion of single women to members of the middle class. Such middle-class women were normally prohibited by "Victorian notions of respectability from leaving home, or engaging in the trades open to working-class women" (Jeffreys 87). Yet spinsters without an allowance or an inheritance had, by choice or necessity, to pursue a vocation, unlike many working-class women who had to work outside the home whether married or not. The social strictures against certain types of employment limited the options available to spinsters, yet, at the same time, according to Vicinus, their education and "personal confidence [enabled them] to take advantage of larger social changes" (6). Smith-Rosenberg likewise distinguishes between the social classes in her discussion of the New Woman in American Victorian culture and describes her not only as "economically autonomous" but also with a "social standing" that "permitted her to defy proprieties, pioneer new roles, and still insist upon a rightful place within the genteel world" (245). Of course, not all spinsters, as we understand the term, are as economically advantaged, highly educated, politically committed, radical, and aggressive as the New Women. Not all spinsters were New Women, but all New Women were spinsters (i.e., unmarried, middle class). Most single women of this period, Vicinus explains, "believed passionately that in order to help others, unmarried women of the middle class had a right and duty to train for and seek out paid work" (1). This commitment to paid work in middle-class occupations sharply delineates single women of the nineteenth century from single women in earlier historical periods, as Vicinus points out:

Single women had held key positions in preindustrial society, including the management of large convents in the Middle Ages, the administration of vast estates during the Renaissance, and the running

of countless shops, small businesses, and inns throughout the early modern period in English history. But increased wealth and consolidation of bourgeois social values in the early nineteenth century condemned spinsters to unremitting idleness and to marginal positions in the home, church, and workplace. The genteel poor woman had a choice of three underpaid and overcrowded occupations—governess, companion, or seamstress. (3)

The designation *spinster*, then, is most certainly socioeconomic and historical.

But is it also psychosexual? Vicinus credits Victorian England with the creation of a symbolic triad, powerful cultural forces to control women by delineating extremes: the ideal mother/wife, the celibate spinster, and the promiscuous prostitute (5). Consequently, Vicinus continues, "the spinster had thrust upon her absolute purity and goodness. She was supposed to remain virginal and utterly self-sacrificing. . . . Celibacy . . . became a vital and empowering ideal" (5). But by the 1920s, Jeffreys explains, the "definition of spinsters was changing. . . . Whilst previously the word *spinster* had simply meant unmarried woman, it was coming to mean, specifically, women who had not done sexual intercourse with men" (175). The ideal state of celibacy promoted in Victorian culture began to read as "abnormality" at the hands of sexologists in the early twentieth century (even as they perpetuated the presumption of celibacy), and the spinster's apparent lack of sexual experience left her vulnerable to attack. Jeffreys further speculates that "this new meaning [of the word '*spinster*'] is much closer [to] the present-day meaning of the word" (175). Yet, even as the term "*spinster*" gradually shifted in the 1920s to refer to single women uninterested or inexperienced in sexual intercourse, some novelists depicted spinsters as sexually active, either with men outside of the prescribed norm of marriage or with women.

The spinster's erotic involvement with women not only removes her from the realms of the celibate, where the sexologists tried to confine her, but also raises the issue of what distinguishes spinsterhood from lesbianism. When the single woman's erotic desire is directed toward women, the line between the spinster and lesbian is blurred: some spinsters claim to be lesbians—or have been called lesbian by others—and vice versa. The similarities between the spinster and the lesbian are striking: both reject the primacy of heterosexual marriage and choose a life-style that, in threatening patriarchy, signals some measure of social deviancy. Yet the spinster and the lesbian—appellations at once problematic and elusive—exist on

two parallel tracks which, although conflated by patriarchy in its attempt both to devalue and marginalize their unique experience, remain separate. Whether the definition of such a socially complex figure as the lesbian is narrow and restrictive (such as Catharine Stimpson's: "a woman who finds other women erotically attractive and gratifying" [97]) or expansive (such as Adrienne Rich's well-known definition that conceivably embraces all women whose "primary intensity [is] between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support" [648-49]), the essential common denominator excludes what we might call a traditional spinster. By definition, the lesbian—even the celibate lesbian—relates, in a special way (whether erotically or emotionally), to another woman or women. Therefore, in the context of this study, it makes little difference whether a spinster is homosexual or heterosexual since what distinguishes a spinster—even if sexually active with women or men—is her deliberate, positive choice *not* to define herself in relation to a significant other. The spinster's primary commitment in life is not to partnership but to independence and autonomy, and, as a result, she relies on her own resources to meet emotional, psychological, and, whenever possible, material needs. (For this reason, widows and divorcees should also be excluded, since they have at one time had traditional attachments to men, and nuns, with solemn vows, are thought to be "married" to God and are not confronted with the problem of choosing an occupation for social survival.)

The spinster, as a historical subject and as a literary representation, thus stands outside of possible relational schemas and resists any comfortable assignment to binary thinking. Within the symbolic order, the spinster is defined by absence; she lacks a primary relationship with a man to fulfill her role as wife and mother. Other available kinship roles (aunt, daughter, or sister, for instance) achieve only marginal importance and cannot compensate for the inadequacy of her single status. Feminist literary critics have questioned this dominant ideology that defines women primarily through their sexuality. Joanne S. Frye argues that such a restricted "femininity text" means that it is impossible to "simultaneously perceive femaleness and autonomy . . . [the] self [exists] *only* in relationship, with marriage and/or motherhood as the appropriate denouement, or the demise of the self" (3). Yet when feminist critics shift their focus from the restrictive binary opposition of male/female to relationships between women (mother/daughter, sisters,