

Fatal Attractions,
Abjection, and the Self
in Literature from the
Restoration to the
Romantics

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By

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For my children, Luke and Julia, my parents, Glenn and Helen,
and my husband, Kurt

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INTRODUCTION

Self is that conscious thinking thing (whatever Substance, made up of whether Spiritual, or Material, Simple, or Compounded, it matters not) which is sensible, or conscious of Pleasure and Pain, capable of Happiness or Misery, and so is concern'd for it *self*, as far as that consciousness extends.

—John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689)¹

This book examines Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection in several works by early British writers from the Restoration period to the Romantic era. Representative rather than comprehensive, this study considers how several "long" eighteenth-century texts engage psychoanalytic modes of abjection described in Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection* (1980), translated into English as *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). Kristeva's theory on abjection explains the relationship between the death drive and erotic desire and offers a radical framework for thinking about seemingly inexplicable acts committed by psychically conflicted characters in literature. Anguished figures in "long" eighteenth-century texts enter states of abjection that lead them to fear the death drive as a devouring force that both consumes and horrifies them. This dread prompts lovelorn characters to enact violence against themselves or others. They often seek authentication through confession, though not for religious absolution. Instead, they speak through phobic discourse, what Kristeva describes as "psycho-drive strategies" uttered through the language of fear.² Desperate characters or speakers articulate self-expressions that result from "primal repression,"³ leading them to murderous or self-destructive acts. They fall prey to fatal attractions. Abjection emerges in literature written during a period that saw an increased emphasis on understanding the self. By the late seventeenth century, writers eagerly sought to discover the mind and its motivations and to test the limits of erotic discourse. Eighteenth-century writers explore the implications of introspection and abject love in its most dangerous potentials for the self, in crisis by the Romantic period.

Interest in understanding the self began with Rene Descartes's *cogito* in the *Discours de la methode* (1637) and John Locke's *tabula rasa* in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689). Seventeenth-century natural philosophers, medical writers, and philosophers wrote

extensively about the mind, later theorized as all-important to understanding the interplay between one's consciousness and unconsciousness by Sigmund Freud and other twentieth-century psychoanalysts. As Roy Porter explains,

Psychoanalysis argued that the rational understanding proudly cultivated by the Renaissance humanists, and likewise Descartes's prized *cogito*, was not after all master in its own house, not the real thing. What truly counted was what had hitherto lurked concealed, an unconscious that was profoundly repressed and hence expressed only obliquely and painfully through illness and hysteria, nightmare and fantasy.⁴

Eighteenth-century writers following Descartes and Locke set out to study and explain the nature of mankind, making the self an important subject of inquiry in literature.⁵ In his *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1738-40), the Scottish philosopher David Hume advances a concept of self that cannot be separated from sense perceptions in flux. The self, he argues, is a constantly moving entity composed of sensations and perceptions. For Hume, the self was not stable, and Hume's ideas signaled a transition in prevailing thought about the self.⁶ In his study *The Making of the Modern Self*, Dror Wahrman argues that models of the self changed during the eighteenth century, eventually giving way to a more individual and interior self, something one carried deep within.⁷ By the Romantic period, the self's transformations prompted a crisis in which the self entered a "bewildered" territory, one where "the self is made anxious not by its relation to anything other than it, but by its own being and its relation to itself."⁸ Even before the late eighteenth century, however, writers were invested in uncovering the darker dimensions of the unconscious, creating deeply tormented characters that sought knowledge of mysterious impulses. The process of self-discovery, as Freud and others later argued, was rooted in unavoidable erogenous tensions and frantic inability to cope with the inevitability of human existence, death, even in the pursuit or fulfillment of carnal desires.

It is perhaps no wonder that the novel grew to greater literary prominence alongside this great philosophical seeking after the self, arguably the plot of most eighteenth-century novels. Poems with tormented speakers or narratives featuring characters with considerable psychic pressures emerge throughout the period as writers responded to ideas on consciousness by Descartes, Locke, and Hume. One of the longest entries in Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755 edition) is for "self." Johnson includes eight definitions spanning over four columns, with exhaustive quotations by a variety of English writers from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries.⁹ Everyone, it seems, had a differing

perspective on what 'self' meant, and the definitions evolved over time to reflect the newly emergent attitudes towards the self.

The pursuit of self-knowledge during the long eighteenth century also reached greater imaginative depths, inspiring new artistic movements, including sensibility, with its attention to expressions of the self's psychological and physiological suffering in relation to others, and the Gothic, a mode of art that examines the self's deepest interior fears, terrors, and experiences of horror. Romantic writers theorized and wrote works about artistic genius and melancholy, creating a cult of the self that has never left us. What emerges in literature written between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries are varying models of the self dominated by interior drives, what Kristeva later describes as states of abjection. It was not the postmodernists that originated the idea of a fragmented or alienated self, already extant in the novels of Daniel Defoe and Laurence Sterne and the claustrophobic spaces of Samuel Richardson's most famous novels of sensibility, *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748). Rather, debates about the nature of the self had been advanced by earlier writers searching for an answer to the question, *what is a self?* Eighteenth-century writers sought a way to define, classify, study, and describe the self. They found no simple answers, only more questions, more incoherence. The stable self simply does not exist. Instead, to come into being, to experience consciousness, is to confront the ambiguities of the unconscious and the horror of the death drive even in the most intimate of human experiences and dis/connections.

Long after Descartes, Locke, and Hume, Freud, his followers, and his critics, including Kristeva, reframed the ongoing discussion about consciousness and the vague dimensions of the unconscious, theorizing about the hidden urges prompting human actions. I have chosen Kristeva's theory on abjection because it provides a constructive perspective for thinking about earlier writers' depictions of the self-in-crisis. Her explanations of abjection in *Powers of Horror* offer readers of long eighteenth-century literature new ways of studying the interior self in texts written during an era preoccupied with discerning the unknown psyche.

Prior to the eighteenth century, the enigmatic self had been primarily taught, studied, and understood through Cartesian or Augustinian frameworks in dialogue with each other.¹⁰ Religious answers became increasingly less important or inadequate, however, as writers turned to secular philosophers rather than preachers or traditional theologians for explanations about human nature. Religious skepticism equally prompted many writers, including the Calvinist Defoe, to explore psychological angst in characters navigating isolating foreign or urban worlds. We find as much

distress in the island-stranded Robinson Crusoe as we do in the London thief, Moll Flanders.

To begin, I have turned to an often understudied seventeenth-century medical theorist and fiction writer, Walter Charleton, one of the first thinkers to examine the causes for psychic strain and dark yearnings in a short amatory narrative, *The Ephesian Matron* (1659). Charleton exerts greater influence on literature than has been acknowledged, and his legacy emerges in all the later works I am considering in this study: Aphra Behn's novella, *The History of the Nun* (1689); Alexander Pope's tragic poems, *Elegy Written to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady* (1717) and *Eloisa to Abelard* (1717); Judith Cowper's responsive poem, *Abelard to Eloisa* (1728); Defoe's last novel, *Roxana* (1724); Charlotte Smith's sonnet sequence, *Elegiac Sonnets* (1797); and John Keats's Gothic poem, *The Eve of St. Agnes* (1820). The speakers, narrators, or characters appearing in these works dwell on mortality even as they pursue lovers. They experience the erotic as phobic, frightening other characters or themselves as they experience a self-induced horror. Psychic enclosures result from primal repressions, which these figures attempt to escape, express, or understand, articulating violent passions they feel for a much longed-for lover, whose emergence in the text forces a confrontation with *Thanatos*, the death drive, through amatory language.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva offers a more complete psychoanalytic vocabulary for understanding the self's unconscious motivations. Her theory rejects the binary thinking of Jacques Lacan's phallogocentrism in "The Signification of the Phallus" (1958), a response to Freud's misogynist psychoanalytic closure for women in his essay, "Femininity" (1933). Kristeva engages the Lacanian linguistic structure where "the phallus is a signifier...intended to designate as a whole the effects of the signified."¹¹ According to Kristeva, *both men and women* enter into phobic yearning, experiencing the same fears and needs. They also feel *chora*, the fluid desires that men and women have repressed in the Imaginary Order. At times, the *chora* breaks through the Real to disrupt it. Jacqueline Rose argues that Lacan's divisive basis for language forces the individual to "line up according to an opposition (having or not having the phallus)."¹² This structuralism emphasizes the enclosed system of Lacan's ordering of Freudian language in the Real, and it cannot fully account for experience in the Imaginary Order. Kristeva presents an alternative to Lacan, suggesting that everyone is subject to fears of castration and the death drive, expressed through the repressions bound up in the *chora*. Her *Powers of Horror* rejects a gendered construction of self-hood and identity formation and creation, a binary she more stringently disavows in her essay "Woman's Time" (1981).

She explains in this essay that we are both repelled and stimulated by the abject, which can produce both *jouissance* and fear, even a malady that engenders bizarre behavior and speech. Abjection often leads characters into what appear to be bouts of madness—not a stereo-typically female condition. Abject figures loathe and long for a lover, and this causes them to suffer from disordered states manifested through heightened language in the *chora* as they encounter signs or signifiers of death.¹³

In her examination of the abject, Kristeva describes “the corpse,” emphasizing the Latin root definition of cadaver: “*cadere*, to fall,”¹⁴ meaning to collapse and to die:

The corpse upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance [...] the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything.¹⁵

But “to fall” means also to cross religious and social boundaries and to enact crime or commit sin, “the utmost of abjection.”¹⁶ The couples, speakers, or lovelorn characters studied in this book remain enclosed in a tomb—real or psychic—and perceive themselves to exist in a grave-like *locus amoenus*, a morbid place of love. They define their pining in descriptions of the dying or the dead, with particular attention paid to the corpse. Characters ruminate on mortality even as they act on their carnal urges; in states of abjection, they shape identities caught up in longing, possession, and jealousy.

Phobic anxiety causes abject figures to break down order. As Kristeva explains, “The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them.”¹⁷ The abject is not passive, and Kristeva rejects the Freudian definitions of femininity keeping women’s sexual role as a confining one reliant on the stereotyped woman as object. Kristeva responds to Freud’s puzzling over the mystery he defines as feminine identity. Freud argues that women are passive rather than aggressive, which he associates with masculine identity.¹⁸ In his argument for a gendered binary in “Femininity,” Freud believes that women, like men, react from a “castration complex” in which “envy and jealousy play an even greater part in the mental life of women than of men.”¹⁹ Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* critiques Freud’s specific psycho-sexual model. To feel physical joy, Kristeva counters, is also to suffer in the abject, an “ambiguity” that Kristeva encompasses within *jouissance*.²⁰ The abject, she explains,

is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become alter ego, drops so that ‘I’ does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime

alienation, a forfeited existence. Hence a *jouissance* in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant.²¹

The *locus amoenus* sours, becoming a space of destruction and fatal ruminations as characters confront death, falling into a fatal void. Their language resembles the description Kristeva offers of the sublime and *sublimation*:

The ‘sublime’ object dissolves in the raptures of a bottomless memory. It is such a memory, which from stopping point to stopping point, remembrance to remembrance, love to love, transfers that object to the refulgent point of the dazzlement in which I stray in order to be. As soon as I perceive it, as soon as I name it, the sublime triggers—it has always already triggered—a spree of perceptions and words that expands memory boundlessly. I then forget the point of departure and find myself removed to a secondary universe, set off from the one where ‘I’ am—delight and loss.²²

This description explains the sweeping changes in expressions that abject figures experience. Considerations of physical bliss and the consummation of frustrated or thwarted passion often lead characters through mental perambulations in “bottomless memory” as they struggle to form a self. As Jerrold Siegel reminds readers, memory was a way, according to Locke, among many other thinkers throughout the long eighteenth century, to establish selfhood.²³ This is the age of the epistolary novel and poem, and the literary epistle was one of the most intimate of forms expressing the self’s private thoughts, wishes, and conflicts. By the end of the eighteenth century, a more fully developed sense of the interior self, composed of a compilation of past experiences, emerged.²⁴ The self was, as Stephanie O’Rourke recently argues, the “repository for one’s psychic past and the basis upon which one’s present self-understanding could be built.”²⁵

According to Kristeva, memory serves another function in the formation of the self. It also precipitates a “fall” of the body into an overwhelmed state.²⁶ The erotic most often points to decay, moving characters from physical pleasure to scenes of death. The two become intermixed as writers examine our most primitive taboo: carnality with a corpse. Humans reject the corpse as we confront the death-drive, which Freud first describes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) as an all-consuming psychological basis for identity formation. Kristeva’s reevaluation of this theory not only alters the gendered construction of phobic desire but also offers new ways of thinking about characters or speakers experiencing the erotic as a psychic trauma.

This study is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1, “The ‘Darksome Imagination’: Walter Charleton’s *Ephesian Matron*,” examines abjection in one of the earliest works of erotic fiction to be published in England, *The Ephesian Matron*, a narrative that describes two lovers consummating their erotic feelings among the dead in a tomb. The matron satisfies her passion for the soldier beside the body of her dead husband, and Charleton appends a medical description explaining their motivations and longings. Realizing there is a missing body in the tomb, the lovers desecrate one of the other bodies to conceal their illicit affair. Chapter 2, “The ‘shameful Feaver’ of Love: Aphra Behn’s *Despairing Nun*,” considers one of the popular ‘nun’ stories appearing in the late seventeenth century in England. Isabella, the heroine, leaves the convent with her lover and enters into a fatal love triangle in Behn’s novella, *The History of the Nun*. Isabella murders her second husband as she disposes of the corpse of her first husband, then confesses her crime before her execution. Chapter 3, “Castrated Love: Tragic Desire in Alexander Pope and Judith Cowper,” looks at several abject figures in three eighteenth-century poems by Pope and Cowper. Pope’s *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady* and *Eloisa to Abelard*, written in the same year, 1717, feature despairing speakers contemplating death after a heartbreak. The speaker of the *Elegy* encounters the ghost of a suicide, a disconsolate lady who dies violently, while Pope’s *Eloisa*, a rebellious nun, grieves over her separation from Abelard, her castrated lover. Cowper’s response to Pope’s *Eloisa*, *Abelard to Eloisa*, imagines a hopeless Abelard writing back to Eloisa from his lonely cell. Each of the characters in these poems looks to the power of discourse to replace confession, entering a state that Kristeva describes as biblical impurity. Chapter 4, “A ‘Dark and Dreadful’ Pleasure: Reading Abjection in Defoe’s *Roxana*,” examines the affliction Defoe’s darkest heroine, Roxana, feels throughout the novel and traces her severe reaction to her daughter, Susan, likely murdered by Roxana’s maid, Amy. Roxana’s primal repression of her real identity, signified by Susan, forces her to confront her compulsive need for authentication. Chapter 5, “Modes of Abjection in Charlotte Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets*,” includes varying registers of suffering in the speakers’ articulations of forbidden passion. The sonnet form gives Smith an opportunity to explore women’s love, and her multi-vocal speakers demonstrate psychic fragmentation. Misery in the sonnets communicates an all-consuming pleasure in *jouissance*, complicating the evolving understandings of self during the late eighteenth century. Chapter 6, “Dreaming the Abject: John Keats’s Lovers in *The Eve of St. Agnes*,” considers a bizarre sexual encounter between the Gothic couple, Madeline and Porphyro. Porphyro enters Madeline’s dream in a complex carnal experience that forces the lovers to confront their horror

of death. Enacting psychic rituals, Madeline sleeps in a chamber where Porphyro finds her transfixed in a state of phobic craving, expressed in a song about fatal love that he sings to her.

CHAPTER ONE

THE 'DARKSOME IMAGINATION': WALTER CHARLETON'S EPHESIAN MATRON

One of the first writers of erotic fiction in England, Walter Charleton, a seventeenth-century physician and writer mainly of medical texts and works of natural philosophy, nevertheless also had a longstanding interest in understanding the motivations driving the unconscious self. The narrator in Charleton's amatory narrative, also a satire, *The Ephesian Matron* (1659, republished in 1668),²⁷ describes the relationship between lust and the death drive. The medical theorizing in the story helped to advance Charleton's philosophy in other nonfiction texts about the passions, seemingly in turmoil in *The Ephesian Matron*, which features a bizarre fatal attraction between two strangers. The narrative includes abject characters consummating their overwhelming need for each other among corpses in a tomb. Drawing on a religious and philosophical vocabulary common to seventeenth-century thinkers, Charleton includes a rationalization for the lovers' erotic expressions that also accounts for their psychic conflicts. H. James Jensen has argued that the lovers express a problem of differing souls that compete within the bodies of the lovers, one spiritual, the other physical.²⁸ While Jensen, among others, provides an important context for understanding theories about religious feelings dominating literature and intellectual debates during the late seventeenth century, he does not fully examine the anxieties both characters demonstrate.²⁹ The lovers in Charleton's story primarily struggle psychically with their sexuality rather than feel tormented by theological models of salvation and damnation.

Charleton augments the original story from Petronius Arbiter's *Satyricon* to examine the contradiction of near-death experience with all-consuming sexual need. He exceeds Petronius's original tale by elaborating on the illicit relationship between the lovers, whose actions are dominated by death all around them. They are surrounded by the corpses in the tomb space where they meet. Charleton may have selected Petronius's satire for several reasons. The story of the Widow of Ephesus was well known during the late seventeenth century. While Petronius and other writers satirize the widow, however, Charleton theorizes about why the widow and soldier act

the way they do. In Charleton's adaptation of Petronius's narrative, the widow grieves intently for her dead husband, recently buried in the tomb. She has elected self-sacrifice, deciding to stay in the tomb and devote herself to his corpse, even wishing to die with him; however, an attractive guard at the tomb seduces her. Faint with extreme hunger, the widow eats and drinks the food and wine he provides. The consumption of food signifies the anticipated seduction of the widow's emaciated body by the soldier. The lovers seek to overcome *Thanatos*, the death drive, first through food, then through sex. The widow's starving state alters her capacity to reason; the approach of death forces her into a state of abjection. Consumed and then rejected by the soldier, who rebukes her after he uses her body, the widow becomes a discarded object the guard associates with the corpse. A libertine, the soldier is now sickened by her after he fulfills his sexual need.

Horrified by his actions, the soldier fears the consequences of abandoning his post to seduce the widow. Both lovers realize a different corpse in the tomb belonging to a criminal is missing, presumably stolen, and the soldier has neglected his duty to watch over this body, just as the matron neglects her role as a widow watching over her husband. The lovers have disrupted the boundaries set by their social order. The narrator describes the widow and soldier as animalistic, as they "degenerateth into the savageness of beasts,"³⁰ with the violence of their passions overtaking them. The narrator explains sexuality as a complex network of intermingled substances, a "mixture of gross and sooty Exhalations, such as arise from ardors of the Body."³¹ The body is, as Charleton explains, "a Paradox,"³² an entity composed of repulsive and desirable substance, a seeming contradiction—much as Kristeva describes the interplay of repulsion and attraction in abjection. As Kristeva describes it, "One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it. Violently and painfully. A passion."³³ An inescapable fury results from the lovers' coupling; their complex reactions result in the desecration of a corpse. Near to death herself, the widow throws her body over the corpse of her husband, literally embracing mortality, while the soldier contemplates suicide.

The couple's reactions to physical consummation among the dead are similar to Kristeva's ideas about the corpse. A dead body, Kristeva argues, "upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance."³⁴ The lovers cross a boundary in the tomb, the threshold between life and death; their sexuality repulses the death drive through a criminal and moral violation of the corpses that threaten their existence. Kristeva explains that "The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them."³⁵

The lovers in *The Ephesian Matron* strongly reject reminders of death even as they embrace their primal urges. They exist in limbo. Kristeva describes erotic "ambiguity"³⁶ that is encompassed within *jouissance*, which includes a landscape of disaster, or "alienation, a forfeited existence."³⁷

Pleasure, Kristeva explains, "is swallowed up" in repulsion.³⁸ In *The Ephesian Matron*, the *locus amoenus* spoils, and the lovers experience a psychic trauma. Charleton's narrator calls the characters' actions consequences of an "afflicted imagination"³⁹ that affects the body. Sickness in the widow nevertheless "caused her to please her self withal,"⁴⁰ but she approaches death with a "macerated and languishing body" that appears enervated by grief. She faints "cross her Husbands Coffin,"⁴¹ and the soldier, seeing this, seeks "the mitigation of her violent sorrow,"⁴² what physicians and medical writers at the time treated as an imbalance of the humours producing the passion of love melancholy.⁴³

One of Charleton's works of natural philosophy, the *Natural History of the Passions* (1674), helped to explain the workings of the passions in the body.⁴⁴ A practicing physician in London by the early 1650s, Charleton gained entry to the Royal College of Physicians in 1676, eventually becoming its President. *The Natural History* explains the relationship between the body, mind, and spirit, examining the tensions between these faculties and Epicurean thought, including the working of atoms in the body. *The Natural History* extends Charleton's *Physiologia Epicuro-Gassendo-Charltoniana, or, A Fabrick of Science Natural, upon the hypothesis of atoms founded by Epicurus, repaired [by] Petrus Gassendus, augmented [by] Walter Charleton* (1654), which also connects the body and mind to Epicurean atomism. Though Charleton is not the only seventeenth-century writer describing sexual love and its effects on the psyche, his work helped to frame discussions about the body-mind relationship during the Restoration and influenced later writers like Aphra Behn, who drew on contemporary philosophical debates to create psychically conflicted female characters in her works. As Akihito Suzuki argues, Charleton advanced the ongoing discussion about the body's physiological reactions to the passions begun by Pierre Gassendi and Descartes, and his ideas were widely disseminated in the late seventeenth century in England.⁴⁵ Charleton's medical descriptions of women's sexual passions in *The Ephesian Matron* anticipate the hysterical women imagined in Bernard Mandeville's medical text, *Treatise of Hypochondriak and Hysterick Passions* (1711), which links disorders of the nerves with women. Mandeville's argument influences George Cheyne's female cases of hysteria in *English Malady: or, A Treatise of Nervous Diseases of All Kinds, as Spleen, Vapours, Lowness of Spirits, Hypochondriacal and Hysterical Distempers, Etc.* (1733).⁴⁶ These theorists

build on Charleton's extensive explanations, including those appearing in his fiction.

Despite Charleton's reliance on natural philosophy in the medical justifications appearing in *The Ephesian Matron*, he does not entirely account for the anxieties both the matron and the soldier feel during their encounter. To borrow Kristeva's theoretical terms, the lovers in *The Ephesian Matron* experience the "primeval essence."⁴⁷ In defiance of social-moral codes of behavior, the couple exchanges corpses—the husband's body for the missing one—to hide the atrocity, degrading the remains. What "causes abjection," Kristeva argues, is "what disturbs identity, system, order."⁴⁸ It is also what "does not respect borders, positions, rules."⁴⁹ Crime is also abject.⁵⁰ The lovers in *The Ephesian Matron* defy expected rituals and rebel against their prescribed social roles, upsetting the boundaries signified by the corpse they destroy. They lose one dead body and defile another, physically tearing apart one of the cadavers in their efforts to conceal their shame. As criminals, the soldier and widow heighten the pleasure of their shared encounter with this violence. The memory of the dead is compromised as the criminal's body becomes so many scattered pieces. Kristeva explains that,

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that is none other than abject.⁵¹

Before her encounter with the soldier, the widow appears dejected, consumed by her mourning rituals. Despite friends urging her to leave the tomb and her husband's body, she refuses, resisting their arguments. She embraces death, nearly a cadaver herself when she clasps her dead husband. Her later actions with the soldier seem inexplicable when compared to her prior grief; it is only in the state of near-death that she enters into the abject. She begins to feel lust as she approaches death. Sympathetic to the widow, the narrator attributes her newfound yearning to the "fallibility" of women having "*flames*" that

*arise from the difference of Sex, and are kindled in the blood, and other luxuriant humours of the body: and that her Amours always tend to the propagation of somewhat more Material, than the simple Ideas of vertue [sic], of which our Philosophical Ladies so much talk.*⁵²

Only at the point of death, however, does the widow succumb to her renewed sexual desires, which result from her reaction to death. Kristeva explains that,

The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being. There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded.⁵³

The husband's death provides an "inaugural loss" to the widow. The body of her husband traumatizes her, forcing her to confront the border of life and death; even the memory of love or shared feeling in families is lost. The entry into abjection, Kristeva writes, "is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory."⁵⁴ The widow forgets her husband, then destroys his identity; he becomes some other being, separate from her. One corpse is replaced by another. The husband has no meaning for the widow now except in her rebellion against the limitations signified by his cadaver. Once crossed, the meaning of that border dissolves.

Charleton sees the widow's sexuality as a medical problem, an inconsistency in her humours, following humoral theory current in late seventeenth-century England.⁵⁵ While Charleton appropriates various seventeenth-century religious terms in his medical explanations drawn from the ancient theorist, Galen, to understand the widow, he cannot fully explain her actions by drawing on religion. The widow appears disordered, entirely changed in the tomb from her original appearance: "Methinks I perceive certain symptoms in her, which signifie not only a change in humour, but even a perfect metamorphosis of her person also."⁵⁶ Once she feels lust for the soldier, she appears with "eyes sparkling again with luster"⁵⁷ and sees him with "languishing glances."⁵⁸ Her lips become "unpardonably scandalous"⁵⁹ with intense "*Extasy*"⁶⁰ when she is in the tomb lusting after the soldier.

The tomb space provides the forbidden border for the widow to cross. Kristeva imagines that such places become blurred by abject craving:

In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject.⁶¹

The widow cannot leave her dead husband, but she rejects, or rather abjects, his corpse with her new lover. In Kristeva's language, "It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons

to us and ends up engulfing us.”⁶² What Charleton describes as the widow’s “mysterious nature”⁶³ and a species of “imperious Passion”⁶⁴ is the need to escape the death drive. Through her phobic eroticism, the widow embraces pleasure, though the narrator describes it as a poison to her: “Like the venomous Spiders of *Calabria*, it destroys us with tickling, and making us dance. While we take it for a sweet and charming harmony, it seduceth us to great and dangerous disorders.”⁶⁵ Charleton goes on to suggest that these “vicisitudes [sic] of contrary Passion”⁶⁶ are not only mysterious but “keep their turns in agitating and perplexing the unsettled mind of Man.”⁶⁷ The soldier, no less than the matron, reacts similarly:

Returning to the Souldier...we find a greater change in him...*Fear, Anger, Rage, and Despair*, have conspired to distract him. One while he casteth up his eyes, that flame with fury; beats his breast; tears his hair; stampeth upon the ground; and useth all the gesture of a man transported to perfect madness with sudden and violent passion. Another while, he stands unmoved, silent, and with eyes fixt upon the earth; as if he were consulting the infernal spirits, what to do with himself. Then suddenly starting, he rouls about his sparkling eyes, lifts up his head, sighs as if he would crack the Fibres of his heart, and breaks forth into short and incoherent, but desperate ejaculations...⁶⁸

The soldier also feels internal tension leading to the destruction of the corpse, the margin blurred, torn up in the lovers’ frenzy against *Thanatos*.

Charleton’s imagining of the soldier draws on already established libertine characters appearing in literature. Most of these figures reject social norms to pursue women, then reject them after achieving the conquest. Often, the libertines’ reflections on love turns morbid, even abject. Charleton could look to works by seventeenth-century writers, including Andrew Marvell, for inspiration. Marvell’s *Daphnis and Chloe*, written in the late 1640s, retells the story of young, innocent love adapted from Longus’s third-century classical romance as a worldly poem of sexual domination. In Marvell’s version, Daphnis’s libertine reactions to his would-be lover, Chloe, result in nauseating scenes of rejected love just at the moment of consummation. Similarly, Thomas Carew’s “A Rapture” (1640) features a libertine speaker who ultimately rejects Celia, the mistress he at first attempts to woo:

If thou complain of wrong, and call my sword
To carve out thy revenge, upon that word
He bids me fight and kill; or else he brands
With marks of infamy my coward hands.

And yet religion bids from blood-shed fly,
 And damns me for that act. Then tell me why
 This goblin Honour, which the world adores,
 Should make men atheists, and not women whores? (ll. 159-160)⁶⁹

Carew's speaker considers the context of seduction within a framework of death, bloodshed, and annihilation. His sexuality is bound to the death drive because of the demands of honor, a giant in the poem representing the social rules that compel the speaker. A libertine, the speaker seeks to tear down honor, but ends up tearing down his intended mistress instead. As Anthony Low argues, "Carew develop[ed]... a radically new kind of love poetry in England—libertine, anti-authoritarian, almost wholly disconnected from the Petrarchan traditions [.]"⁷⁰

Charleton writes during the transition between earlier and later libertine traditions during the seventeenth century, which saw a flourishing of works featuring misogynistic speakers or characters. These writers often express dismissive attitudes towards women that anticipate the misogyny in libertine poetry written during the Restoration. One of the mid seventeenth-century libertine writers, Richard Lovelace, wrote *Lucasta* poems in the classical style of Catullus's *Lesbia* poems, and his "Love Made in the First Age. To Chloris" (1649) objectifies women: "Lasses like autumn plums did drop, / And lads indifferently did crop / A flower and a maidenhead" (ll. 16-8).⁷¹ The speaker argues that Chloris should "miserably crave" (l. 55) him, and he fantasizes about his power over her, rejecting her as he "evermore...must deny" (l. 57) his love to her. Libertine poets frequently scorn women in their erotic verse, anticipating the infamous Restoration rake, John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester, whose verses frequently deride, humiliate, and abuse women, setting a pattern also for mistreatment of women by libertine men on the Restoration stage.⁷² Seventeenth-century libertines in real life and in literature act, as James Turner suggests, "the Priapean, the spark or ranter, the roaring blade, the jovial atheist, the cavalier, the sensualist, the rake, the murderous upper-class hooligan, the worldly fine gentleman, the debauchee, the beau, the man of pleasure, and even the 'man of sense.'"⁷³ By the late seventeenth century, libertine men might have acquired the "wit and finesse"⁷⁴ lacking in earlier periods, but they express deep-seated psychic tensions in their poetry and an obsessive pining to draw attention to the narcissistic self in crisis. Many of them turn to considerations of death, even in *carpe diem* love lyrics.

The soldier in Charleton's *The Ephesian Matron* appears similar to other seventeenth-century libertines. His language anticipates Rochester's more vicious poems about women. The soldier blames his mistress, the widow, his discourse comparable to the bodily effluence

Kristeva describes in her theory on abjection. According to the narrator, the soldier “vomits” his “blasphemies” on the “innocent *Woman*.”⁷⁵ The matron is now described as digested food; once consumed, she is “belched out”⁷⁶ by her lover. To appropriate Kristeva’s description of abject love, the libertine soldier repels the matron in a

shattering violence of a convulsion that, to be sure, is inscribed in a symbolic system, but in which without either wanting or being able to become integrated in order to answer to it, it reacts, it abreacts. It abjects.⁷⁷

According to the narrator in *The Ephesian Matron*, the soldier “vomits the remainder of his Choller.”⁷⁸ Kristeva describes confronting actual death as prompting physical effluence, another sign of abjection:

No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death....If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything.⁷⁹

Like the starving widow earlier in the story, the soldier now too wishes to kill himself but is discouraged by the widow. Revived now, the widow decides they should use her husband’s corpse to substitute for the missing body. She embarks on a criminal act. Such acts demonstrate abjection; they are “immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady.”⁸⁰ Such violations are seen throughout the literature examined in this study, particularly amatory fiction popular during the long eighteenth century.⁸¹ Helen Thompson reminds us that Charleton’s *The Ephesian Matron* exerts an influence on this kind of fiction.⁸² His narrative shows greater attention to understanding the effects of physical passion, an interest that grew as writers probed the desires compelling the hidden self. The buried life fascinated writers, theatrical audiences, and readers, including Charles II, who attended and helped to write plays focusing on the problems of psychic angst in amorous relationships.

Charleton’s *The Ephesian Matron* was republished in 1668 during a time when bodies and minds were held up for inspection. This was especially true for women. The first English actress performed on the stage in 1662, and Charles II elevated his mistresses at court to prominence. Writers began to create heroines resembling these many powerful mistresses, most of them famous for their promiscuity and violent outbursts of temper. For several decades, Barbara Villiers, Duchess of Cleveland,

Nell Gwyn, Louise de K roualle, Duchess of Portsmouth, and Hortense Mancini, Duchess of Mazarin dominated court life and literature. John Dryden wrote plays about tragic queens reminiscent of them, while Gwyn is cited in Daniel Defoe's *Roxana*.⁸³ The famous diarist Samuel Pepys, also obsessed with their lives, records his disbelief at their cultural and political influence during the 1660s: "the King of France hath his Maistresses [sic], but laughs at the foolery of our King, that makes his bastards princes, and loses his revenue upon them—and makes his mistresses his masters."⁸⁴ Pepys might have disapproved, but he took a prurient interest in the mistresses and the vices of the court:

the King and Court were never in the world so bad as they are now for gaming, swearing, whoring, and drinking, and the most abominable vices that ever were in the world—so that all must come to naught...the Court is in a way to ruin all for their pleasures.⁸⁵

Looking to make a profit, amatory writers during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries wrote about the illicit sexual vices of court celebrities, alternately admired and ridiculed. Mazarin in particular inspired Behn, who dedicates *The History of the Nun* to her and draws on Mazarin's memoirs, likely written with the French romancer, C sar Vichard de St.-R al, as the *Memoires de Mme. La Duchesse de Mazarin* (1675; translated into English in 1676). As the writer of the *Memoires* reminds us, Mazarin, like all the court figures, was notorious and often attacked:

it is very Natural to defend one's self from Calumny; and to make appear, to those, of whom we have received considerable Services, that we are not so unworthy of their Favours, as the traducing World would make us appear to be...I know the chief Glory of a Woman ought to consist, in not making her self to be publickly talked of. And those that know me, know like-wise that I never took much pleasure in things that make too much Noise. But it is not always in our choise to live our own way: And there is a kind of Fatality, even in those things that seem to depend upon the wisest Conduct.⁸⁶

Behn employs Mazarin's life story for *The History of the Nun* despite Mazarin no longer being a prominent court mistress. The appeal may have been literary, as Mazarin's life "seem[ed] to favour much of the *Romance*."⁸⁷ Readers also developed interests in the stereotypically disordered feminine body and mind, scrutinized throughout the period in famous women and the literary heroines inspired by them.⁸⁸

In the next chapter, I consider Behn's murderous Isabella in *The History of the Nun*. When her first husband appears to return from the dead,

Isabella reacts violently, committing a double homicide. Late seventeenth-century writers often concentrated in their works on characters' aberrant behaviors. So-called she-tragedy was popular, and the genre typically involves the anguish of a perceived fallen woman engaging in promiscuous or illicit sexual acts, much like the widow in Charleton's *The Ephesian Matron*. Dramatists, including the reputedly insane Nathaniel Lee, wrote plays with psychically conflicted characters engaging in destructive acts. His characters rage against others in fatal encounters.⁸⁹ Like most late seventeenth-century writers, Lee drew on the medical language of his day taken from the texts by Charleton and others, and Charleton's fiction helped to spark discussion in literature about psychosexual troubles motivating characters' fatal attractions.⁹⁰

CHAPTER TWO

THE “SHAMEFUL FEVER” OF LOVE: APHRA BEHN’S DESPAIRING NUN

The Restoration writer Aphra Behn gives notable attention to fatal attractions in her works, often featuring female characters in states of angst.⁹¹ Nowhere is this more evident than in her dark novella, *The History of the Nun*, which focuses almost exclusively on the heroine’s struggles with psychological affliction. An abject figure, Isabella experiences intense grief and murders both of her husbands. Like the widow in Charleton’s *The Ephesian Matron*, Isabella breaks down the threshold of social norms, seeing both of her husbands as corpses to be loathed and discarded.

Kristeva offers a useful definition of the “Improper/Unclean” that offers a way of seeing Isabella’s abjection:

Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. The shame of compromise, or being in the middle of treachery. The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them.⁹²

Shame consumes Isabella, a nun who leaves the convent to marry one man, then, believing him dead, marries another. The first husband returns, prompting a psychic crisis. Like G. A. Starr, I believe Isabella does not conform to the passive models found in romance formulations of heroines.⁹³ She enters a compromising position as a bigamist, and she must reject these husbands. They are abject to her.

Kristeva calls the corpse “the jettisoned object.”⁹⁴ In Behn’s novella, the bodies are literally thrown aside as Isabella hurls them both to their deaths. She repels them as loathsome objects. Her mindset resembles Kristeva’s description of the human psyche confronting death: “On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture.”⁹⁵ In this state, one experiences “repugnance, disgust,

abjection.”⁹⁶ Behn’s Isabella finds Henault and Villenoy’s intolerable, signs of restriction and humiliation that she destroys.

Called a “vow-breaker” in the title, Isabella first rebels against social and religious constraints when she escapes a nunnery, disregarding her sacred vows, which the narrator defines as her ultimate abomination, the greater crime and a more horrible one than the murders. To break religious vows is to be, as Kristeva explains it, “loathsome,” because the rebellion “disobeys classification rules peculiar to the given symbolic system.”⁹⁷ In Behn’s text, this system is the religious order. Kristeva defines “biblical impurities”⁹⁸ as a form of abjection: “Purity or impurity are thus situated in relation to cult because the latter represents or serves a *logic of distribution* and behavior on which the symbolic community is founded: a Law, a reason.”⁹⁹ Isabella violates her symbolic community, and the murders that she commits later in life are an extension of her initial religious rejection. As the narrator explains, breaking religious vows constitutes the worse offence imaginable because it is a mutiny against God:

Of all the Sins, incident to Human Nature, there is none, of which Heaven has took so particular, visible, and frequent Notice, and Revenge, as on that of *Violated Vows*, which never go unpunished; and the *Cupids* may boast what they will for the encouragement of their Trade of Love, that Heaven never takes cognisance of Lovers broken Vows and Oaths, and that ’tis the only Perjury that escapes the Anger of the *Gods*.¹⁰⁰

Kristeva accounts for abject violations of religion as “biblical impurities”:

Biblical impurity is thus always already a *logicizing* of what departs from the symbolic, and for that very reason it prevents it from being actualized as demonic evil. Such a logicizing inscribes the demonic in a more abstract and also more moral register as a potential for guilt and sin.¹⁰¹

Isabella’s ‘sin’ of leaving the convent carries the most weight—it forms the first transgression she perpetrates against the community. Even so, the narrator shows Isabella tremendous sympathy. The entire community sorrows for Isabella, whose loss of her mother at an early age acts as a catalyst for abjection throughout the narrative. As Kristeva explains, the mother is “the absolute because primeval seat of the impossible—of the excluded, the outside-of-meaning, the abject. Atopia.”¹⁰² Isabella loses both of her parents at a young age, and the deep tensions experienced as a result can be understood to cause the later psychic break she experiences when she murders Henault and Villenoy’s.