

Silencing the sirens and sprites; a critique of the male's de-feminized (and idealized) approach to women's life, language, and philosophy

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The world is a self-evident place: a reflexive and historical one not so easily understood. Modern times are enveloped simultaneously by modern and archaic thought, in so much as the changes which pervade our philosophy and language, both our practical and ideal ways of life, continue to be directly influenced by the markers of our past; no less than our foresight - rarely of a pure reformative nature - deems these markers necessary or contingent, whilst also positing new ones for the roads we pave ahead.

The woman, incontestably propounded the *Other* by such thinkers as Simone De Beauvoir and writer Ingeborg Bachmann, is no exception to this process of idealization; as imposed by the unfortunateness of a male dominated society, ie., a male dominated history. Treated as a marker by her male counterparts, even in today's more politically augmented social realm, the woman and her ideal is often left to the realm of the past; as if - and I hate myself for using this analogy - she is some attic-dwelling knickknack, that shan't change but only further herself into yesterday. By this account, ie., a historical one, the woman has been relegated to a position absent of her own willing-choice: to be an autonomous voice, thinker, and overall *being*. This is because the man, by and large, has stood tall above this history of the world and has made the past his own; domesticating the woman to certain roles and places. Women were forced - at most points in time and still to great extent today - to become wives, childbearers, and mistresses

in the name of a greater male outcome with no consideration for her own call to life. Disgusting does not begin to describe it, but perhaps - as I wish to explore here - Bachman's declaration can: *You humans! You monsters!* (a, pp. 178). In the most literal and material senses, through her *Undine geht*^a, we shall see how the man has reshaped and refined history to his liking; in a manner that has not left the woman untouched but has rather subsumed her under this *Other*, or *immanent*, thing: as projected. And further, via comparisons to De Beauvoir's own life and thought, we shall bring to light the modern ways men continue to subdue the woman's autonomous voice; in both philosophy and the aforementioned literature.

Beginning with this term *immanent* - if I am to paraphrase De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*^b - we unanimously refer to the ideal of woman as inwardly driven and directed toward the physical realm; embodying a stagnant nature, in which habit exceeds ascendance. Of course, granted the position of the man as the counterforce that has made women wives and mistresses, we can fairly reason that this immanence is not of her explicit fault. She has been subdued, ultimately, to these images (or ideals); that we shall explore further, later on through mythological and literary de-feminization by male writers and thinkers. An important thing to note here, however, is that - according to De Beauvoir - the woman is in no way inherently lacking her analogue's *transcendent* nature¹; ie., the man's attitude of outward extension into the world, directed toward the *divine*² and intelligible realms (b, pp. 441 - 443). It is merely that, through her historical relegation to positions such as wife or mother, she is often rendered incapable of achieving this sort-of *male status of enlightenment*. She must remain in marriage or

¹ The human being, as both man and woman, is neither (solely) one attitude or the other. De Beauvoir sees these attitudes as inseparable in the singular human species. The man, and woman on the other hand, only seemingly adopt *more* characteristic features from either position (ie., transcendent or immanent); based on historical bias and happenings.

² Not literally a realm of *gods* or religiousness, but the realm of society associated with cultivating knowledge and pressing the boundaries of the physical and, further, building upon them; as implied by *intelligibility*, of a mind (or soul), versus the woman's imposed bodily existence.

in the household. The full extent of the world, where the male's sun (and sons) shine over the horizon of opportunity and autonomous creation, remains a closed entity to her. But how exactly has this happened? And how might we mend this superficial gap created by the sexes between the sexes? First, and most advantageously, we should proceed through the experiences of women, written and explicated *by women*. Thus, we return to Bachmann.

We see this paradox, between the man (as self) and woman (as *Other*) - but also, by extension, the self against self within both species³ - expressed best through Bachmann's mythological allusion to the undine, in her *Undine geht*. Traditionally, deriving from German mythology, the undine is an elemental water sprite; liminal by design, and thus capable of transcending the border between the human and spiritual realms. Thus, similar to De Beauvoir's argument for the woman, it does not lack one nature or the other, as either masculine or feminine; it posits both, yet is limited to the immanent position by its counterpart⁴. Bachmann, through her *Undine geht*, narrates a very personal story of conflict and love between the Undine - whose voice she embodies - and *men* in general named Hans⁵, through this disposition to the *water*; ie., the realm of immanence. Though water alludes of course to some level of fluidity, which may be interpreted as transcendence, the narrative relegates the water as less involved, or intelligible, than the land belonging to the Hans (that we shall explore indepthly just a bit later). The elemental Undine opines, "I love the water, its dense transparency, the green in the water and the dumb creatures (I too shall soon be equally dumb), my hair among them, in it, the just water, the indifferent mirror that forbids me to see you differently. The wet frontier between me and me..." (a, pp. 178). There are two important notes to take from here in further analyzing the

³ Man and woman, as selves, intuiting self.

⁴ Further allusion to this is demonstrated by the mythological undine's lacking of a *human soul*.

⁵ Hans is an extremely common name amongst the Germanic countries, alluding to a very modern, feminist notion that *all men are the same*; or, (analogously), that they adopt the same attitudes and positions against women.

Undine as more immanent to the Hans of society. Firstly, in claiming a love for the water, the Undine makes clear her position of inwardness via a nostalgic attachment to her own realm. She, in adopting this projection of man, is rendered incapable of escape. A water elemental, nonetheless liminal, should fundamentally belong to and arise from the world of water. She describes herself as *in it*, amongst the dumb creatures; which is our second important acknowledgement. This is a direct assertion of the *water* as somewhere less intelligible to the land, ie., as something more physical and indifferent (or mediocre) where women must reside. Rather, as transcendent men, the Hans of the society are not forced to belong amongst these *dumb creatures* nor do they wish to venture, “into that element in which no one builds a nest, raises a roof over rafters, covers himself with an awning. To be nowhere, to stay nowhere,” (a, pp. 178). The Hans, by this account, are *free* beings ironically more fluid than the Undine. They are dynamic and self assertive which enables them to build a society from the ground, ie., the land, upwards. The Undine, however, must remain a vassal to be sought by the man in his loneliness. And once he is done with her, to the water she must always return; that groundless realm where nothing she is producing or produces can stand.

To compare this with modern issues of society, a common difference - expounded by feminist movements - seen between men and women today is their willingness to *change for one-another*. Most often referred to as the *double standard*⁶, women are - to a profoundly higher degree - expected to change their inherent personalities to conform to the male dominated society: the one of transcendence. By these means they become, and are forced to become, *more masculine*. Immanence is - seemingly - to be forgotten. Bachmann makes allusion to this

⁶ The double standard does not only refer to this phenomena of desired change, it is an antilogical form. It blankets a number of important feminist issues, concerning the ways women's bodies are held to higher standards of critique than men's, along with the ways in which women are expected to use their bodies; concerning sex, childbearing, abortion and much more. Eg., the man who confronts another is *bold*, whereas the woman who does the same is a *bitch* - a tremendously vile inversion of logic.

phenomena via the notion of the Undine's elemental nature, as water, and that of the *clearing*. The clearing, wherein the Undine always meets a man named Hans, accordingly represents the male dominated society that seeks to reshape her by striking the water from her arms, and licking the dew from her hair (a, pp. 177). To remove the water from the water sprite means to change the very *being* -itself; and in return the male offers no recompense, ie., no amendment of his own position. He does not join the water sprite in her realm - to become *more feminine* - or seek to grant her access to his own. He expects the world to surrender itself to him for nothing, and the modern world has consequently begun to (rightfully so) clamor him for it. We see this abundantly today in the working realm, to which men and women are purportedly now *equally* admitted. But it is simple to see the irony here, should we open our eyes to the material world, as men so often do not, looking upon their red flags with red-tinted frames. Orientation in thinking is important to make note of here as well; granted the man is raised to think transcendence is the solution for autonomy; as if god is becoming of him. Nevertheless, aside from the easily recognizable pay gaps between them, there are also the issues of representation and accommodation for women workers; who, of course, have social and biological limitations that do not necessarily overlap the male's. These are - but are not limited to - menstruation, childbirth, constant fear of sexual assault and harassment, and being a minority in male dominated professions⁷. I do not mean to present these as disadvantages, but merely explicate their social constructivism and the differences they create between the sexes regarding the aforementioned: representation and accommodation. Eg., the woman who bears a child and must take leave from work is rarely accommodated for such absence, with pay that is; as if she should be punished for something, frankly, out of her control (See c and e). Though it is her choice - at

⁷ There are, additionally, extenuating circumstances to men who suffer from sexual assault and men who belong to minority groups, such as BIPOC and the LGBT+ communities.

least in instantiated circumstances⁸ - to have a child, it is not her explicit desire to put her own life on hold and abandon the working environment. This she lacks control over; the hardships of childbirth and child raising are far too physically and mentally exhaustive to allow for both activities to persist. Further, eg., the woman who constantly fears harassment is seen as hysterical or irrational; as if - from the male's vile perspective - she was not *asking for it*: "...crying it out, Hans, Hans....," (a, pp. 177). Nevertheless, her fostering of yet another male ideal, ie., of something like *motherhood* or *mistress*, leads once again to her punishment by the male. It is a rather ass backwards concept to wrap one's head around; one that the Undine seeks to understand here: "You monsters, that was why I loved you, because you knew what the call meant, because you allowed yourselves to be called, because you were never in agreement with yourselves," (a pp. 181). The Hans understand what it is that they do, in purporting their own transcendence as the path of least resistance - toward a self willing life - whilst simultaneously leaving the Undine in her dark obscuring tides. Life is played like a game by them.

Additionally from *Undine geht*, continuing via the juxtaposition made of the Undine, the Hans, and their wives; Bachmann comments on the double standard confounded by the very institution of marriage, through an interesting notion of language. It is presented as a force of ensnarement, securing the woman within these social positions via relegation to ideal figures, known only by self-conception of word:

You who make women your mistresses and wives, one-day wives, week-end wives, lifetime wives and let yourselves be made into their husbands. (Perhaps that is worth waking up for.) You with your jealousy of your women, with your arrogant forbearance

⁸ This excludes women who are otherwise forced into childbirth, by societal pressures and immoral wrongdoings done onto them.

and tyranny, your search for sanctuary with your women; you with your housekeeping money and your joint good-night conversations, those sources of new strength, of the conviction that you are right in your conflicts with the outside world, you with your helplessly skillful, helplessly absent-minded embraces. I was amazed to see that you give your wives money for the shopping and for clothes and for the summer holiday, then you invite them out (invite them, that means you pay, of course). You buy and let yourselves be bought (a, pp. 180).

We see here that the Hans are essentially capable of relegating all of the women in their lives to these various positions of companionship - as wives, one-day wives, etc. - without any consequences becoming their sole position as *husband*. And further, as the Undine, Bachmann describes the male tendency toward jealousy and their overall self-contradictory natures - to buy and let themselves be bought - belonging once again to this modern notion of the double standard. After all, men are excessively and scarily more likely to confront and assault women on the bases they are *unfaithful*, or simply not fulfilling their duties as a *lover* or *wife*⁹. But the man, irregardless, does not need to prove this same sentiment to the woman. The word *wife* carries much more weight than that of the *husband*, as she is expected to subsume herself under the husband and the sanctity of the marriage; whereas, in Bachmann, we see the man flee his home the first chance he can scrounge, to entertain himself with whom he call mistresses such as the Undine, who herself seeks true companionship and becomes angry with man's continued unfaithfulness. De Beauvoir similarly comments on the power marriage (as an ideal) extends to the male, by means of his literal, material *taking a wife*. The act of communion - once the woman

⁹ Faithfulness, as a male ideal, is contradictory in of itself; considering males are historically the proponents of unfaithful actions such as *cheating*, ie., to have mistresses. Kings may sleep with the many but queens mustn't fault their kings. How absurd.

has said the words *I do*, and transformed into a *bride* - allows him to dip his toes into the realm of immanence, but only to anchor himself to the social construct that marriage - as an archaic practice, and au fond realization of religious dowry - has enabled him as superiority; at best to raise a family, and yet nonetheless such that he may still escape the household in the dark of night, just like the Hans to seek his fun elsewhere (b, pp. 442 - 445). Language-itself is an extremely important notion to continue with from here, as being the idealization of power that allows men to subdue the societal position of women, to the mere immanent realm; what I ultimately hope to demonstrate here, through Bachmann and De Beauvoir, as the underlying cause for obstruction of the *Other's* own lack of self-realization.

When the woman says *I do*, the man takes his wife. Preliminarily however the woman must be called a *woman*, such that the man can relegate her nextly to the position of *wife*. The language at play here is already, historically speaking, one of subservience. But let us return to Bachmann once again, and consider the very notion (or word) - in the most abstract terms - of the *undine*, so that we might better understand this. The process of de-feminization, after all, has taken its most grandiose form from literature that spreads false ideas on material concepts and beings. Many classical myths written by men, because only they were entrusted to read and write - and to embody those intelligible qualities - depict women as such as muses and sirens; another characteristic of the traditional undine, alluded to by Bachmann through *the call*. Undine we're often shown residing in ponds and near waterfalls, singing their alluring songs to attract male suitors¹⁰; and Bachmann's own Undine takes up this role by asking the man to, "Come. Just once. Come," (a, pp. 186). An important question is raised by this idealization of the *undine*,

¹⁰ Consider one classical example: Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, from 1837. The Little Mermaid, within the story, trades her singing voice for a human soul so that she may live on land with the prince; who instead marries a princess from another kingdom. In seeking to join the surface world, the Little Mermaid ironically loses her voice: symbolic of the woman's journey into the social realm of language, classically understood as masculine.

granted the material woman has been reformulated by the male author into some divine and *to be feared* creature of myth (ie., idea). What if, absent of any writing man's intention, the undine as a *being itself* simply desired to sing for singing's sake? To be independent? Ie., as figures created *by men*, mythological beings like the undine possess no means of autonomous creation or *real being for themselves*. From De Beauvoir, we see that the woman's being is formulated as, "subordinate, secondary, parasitic...the very meaning of her life is not in her hands," and this begins at their conception; their relegation, by male language and attitude, to the immanent place of the ideal *woman*. Their singing voices, their beauty and all else, were crafted by men *for men*. Thus, in this sense, Bachmann's *Undine geht* provides a fervent commentary on the very male-designed nature of the woman-itself, as pure ideal, and literature as a tool for this continued means of subjugation to certain *words* or *nouns*; just as De Beauvoir proves through historical, philosophical notions. Overall, they both suggest this relegation to *nouns*, such as *wife*, leave the woman in a position absent of autonomy or joy. Consider more ardently De Beauvoir's description of the work conscripted by idealized *marriage*: "The woman's work within the home gives her no autonomy; it is not directly useful to society, it does not open out on the future, it produces nothing," (b, pp. 442). To produce nothing means her work is considered without purpose and thus a work done *beside herself*, for the sheer intent of defending the male and male society. And so, it remains a struggle for women authors to find their creative voice because her purported *natural* position has always been one directed by the male's compass. This is not to say women have not tried or succeeded in self production. Merely from a materialist stand, his voice has preceded hers in telling which direction to take the story, which characters to write, and how they should behave.

This is all to summarily say books written by men - and all other things from which language arises as word or speech or sign - will appeal more enthusiastically to men; but not as if they contain any right, as any sort-of pure knowledge of what is good or *is* in general. It is merely a historical appeal governed by the ruling vehemence and language. Thus, when the transcendent attitude dominates so too will literature and all other parts of society seek ascendancy; and consequently abandon any other means of self-realization. Bachmann, as Undine, further states to demonstrate this phenomenon of language's permeance and male guidance¹¹, "Never was there so much magic over things as when you spoke, and never were words so powerful. You could make speech flare up, become muddled or mighty. You did everything with words and sentences, came to an understanding with them or transmuted them, gave things a new name; and objects, which understand neither the straight nor the crooked words, almost took their being from your words," (a, pp. 186). And so, we can see just how much power is held behind the simple terms crafted by those transcendent male literates: of *woman*, of *wife*, of *undine* and so on. By merely naming her Undine - along with coining terms for all other objects of the world - the Hans have conquered the world-itself. The world, inadvertently, has become a reflection of them (ie., those terms and language) because the world-itself, the land, is a fundamentally *male ideal*. They have sought, in giving the Undine her voice, to simultaneously strip her of it and its considered-seductive power; even though they were the ones to first posit her seductiveness and seek her company.

Contradiction, as Bachmann has already told us, is the nature of life for *all*, the Undine and the Hans alike. But by these same means the Hans have unequivocally captured the linguistic power of contradiction between idea and object, to place themselves above the immanent and the women within it. Whilst he can *think! be! and speak out!*, she *does not understand and cannot*

¹¹ I am inclined to call this *misguidance*.

understand (a, pp. 181) The dictionary written by the man, ie., the language he creates and contorts, will speak for none other than himself. He has the material power to change his willing-*being*. The ideal of the woman however, crafted by men for men, inherently lacks her experiential basis in this world for the men have always tried to talk themselves over her¹²: to silence her alluring song without ever truly listening. Margaret Simons makes a good example of this regarding De Beauvoir's own publications - especially of *The Second Sex* - and the historical interpretations provided by male philosophers (and translators), who have often subordinated her works under the likes of male existentialists Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. Some as she further notes even claim Sartre to have written De Beauvoir's works, excluding her name from their citations, consequently overlooking any possibility for an original thought to have arisen from a woman. The relationship between De Beauvoir and Sartre is commonly misstated and exaggerated; formulating her as a figure of dependence (ie., immanence). And very rarely is she even mentioned by name, with some male thinkers simply referring to her as *that woman* and then proceeding in great detail to encounter Sartre (d, pp. 104, 106). Truly, I must give credit where credit is due: for us males, as the 'intelligible ones', to have gone to such remarkable lengths to prove ourselves the other way around; and take no credit for it. How humble indeed! But I digress, it is sufficiently evident from these experiences we have hence endeavored - by and through women - the extent to which the male has subsumed the use of language in all its

¹² The modern notion I am alluding to here is similar to *mansplaining*; though I have issues with the exact ways this term has been brought forth. What I would like to clarify this as here, rather, is the manner by which men pretend to understand the women's disposition in society without actually considering these supposed material claims from an experiential basis. This may seem impossible, granted the man can not assimilate the women's experiences in some pure manner. We would not disagree here. Instead, my critique is that he commonly seeks to only understand her in abstract terms, through idealization of standards heteronomously imposed by male dominated society; rather than autonomously producing his own notions from his experience *with* women, through and *by* women.

contradictory nature - as the *torture house* of being - over his female half; both within and outside of himself.

And so, to conclusively reiterate this notion of idealization and de-feminization, I ask; is it not the case that the woman whose nude body we have so longingly encased in marble is placed - unquestionably - freely on the museum floor, whilst the woman who wishes merely not to wear a bra in public - to seek domain over *her body* - is condemned? The separation between the ideal woman and the material being has imposed such a great harm to her existence in this world, to the point she has - as Bachmann says - taken her being directly from the *crooked words* of a male society's creation. This subordination, first and foremost, begins with language and has been perpetuated throughout history by the male dominated literature (and its interpretations) of ideals. The sprite we are taught to worship and the siren we are told to fear have unanimously represented one *being*: the woman. And her voice, first shattered and then silenced by her male counterparts, will slip unheard into the trench of the immanent sea should we not come, just once, and *listen*. Ground yourself in the material of the woman, even if you are not one; do not seek to transcend it. You are but a dumb creature too, who likes to play at god and treat the world as mere soil when the world - come the day we shall all dissolve from our ideals of *men* and *women* - uses you only as fertilizer. Because the world cares not which you are or which you choose to be; it simply asks to remain whole through us. This is self-evident.

Notes

^aBachmann, Ingeborg. *Undine geht*, The Thirtieth Year: Stories, Translated by Michael Bullock. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., NY, 1964. pp. 177 - 187.

^bDe Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*, Translated and edited by H.M. Parshley. Lowe and Brydone (Printers) LTD., London, 1956.

^cGovernment of, U.S. "The Federal Register." *Federal Register, Part 825 - The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993*, United States Department of Labor, 6 Feb. 2013, <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-29/subtitle-B/chapter-V/subchapter-C/part-825#825.217>.

^dSimons, Margaret A. *Sexism and the Philosophical Canon: On Reading Beauvoir's The Second Sex*, Beauvoir and *The Second Sex: Feminism, Race, and the Origins of Existentialism*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., MD, 1999. pp. 101 - 114.

^eWisniewski, Megan. "In Puerto Rico, No Gap in Median Earnings between Men and Women." *Census.gov*, United States Census Bureau, 20 Oct. 2022, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/03/what-is-the-gender-wage-gap-in-your-state.html#:~:text=There%20are%20a%20multitude%20of,to%20gaps%20in%20overall%20earnings>.