

We are foolish, and without excuse foolish, in speaking of the « superiority » of one sex to the other, as if they could be compared in similar things. Each has what the other does not: each completes the other, and is completed by the other: they are in nothing alike, and the happiness and perfection of both depends on each asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give.

Now their separate characters are briefly these: the man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest, wherever war is just, wherever conquest necessary. But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle, — and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. She sees the qualities of things, their claims, and their places. Her great function is Praise: she enters into no contest, but infallibly judges the crown of contest. By her office, and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation. The man, in his rough work in the open world, must encounter all peril and trial: to him, therefore, must be the failure, the offense, the inevitable error: often he must be wounded, or subdued; often misled, and always hardened. But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offense. This is the true nature of home — it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home: so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in. But so far as it is a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods, before whose faces none may come but those whom they can receive with love, — so far as it is this, and roof and fire are types only of a nobler shade and light, — shade as of the rock in a weary land, and light as of the Pharos in the stormy sea, — so far it vindicates the name, and fulfills the praise of home. [...]

This, then, I believe to be, — will you not admit it to be, — the woman's true place and power? But do not you see that to fulfill this, she must — as far as one can use such terms of a human creature — be incapable of error? So far as she rules, all must be right, or nothing is. She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise — wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fall from his side: wise, not with the narrowness of insolent and loveless pride, but with the passionate gentleness of an infinitely variable, because infinitely applicable, modesty of service — the true changefulness of woman.

Sesame and Lilies, John Ruskin, 1864

The summer she was fifteen, Melanie discovered she was made of flesh and blood. O, my America, my new found land. She embarked on a tranced voyage, exploring the whole of herself, clambering her own mountain ranges, penetrating the moist richness of her secret valleys, a physiological Cortez, da Gama or Mungo Park. For hours she stared at herself, naked, in the mirror of her wardrobe; she would follow with her finger the elegant structure of her ribcage, where the heart fluttered under the flesh like a bird under a blanket, and she would draw down the long line from breast-bone to navel (which was a mysterious cavern or grotto), and she would rasp her palms against her bud-wing shoulderblades. And then she would writhe about, clasping herself, laughing, sometimes doing cart-wheels and handstands out of sheer exhilaration at the supple surprise of herself now she was no longer a little girl.

She also posed in attitudes, holding things. Pre-Raphaelite, she combed out her long, black hair to stream straight down from a centre parting and thoughtfully regarded herself as she held a tiger-lily from the garden under her chin, her knees pressed close together. A la Toulouse Lautrec, she dragged her hair sluttishly across her face and sat down in a chair with her legs apart and a bowl of water and a towel at her feet. She always felt particularly wicked when she posed for Lautrec, although she made up fantasies in which she lived in his time (she had been a chorus girl or a model and fed a sparrow with crumbs from her Paris attic window). In these fantasies, she helped him and loved him because she was sorry for him, since he was a dwarf and a genius.

She was too thin for a Titian or a Renoir but she contrived a pale, smug Cranach Venus with a bit of net curtain wound round her head and the necklace of cultured pearls they gave her when she was confirmed at her throat. After she read *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, she secretly picked forget-me-nots and stuck them in her pubic hair.

Further, she used the net curtain as raw material for a series of nightgowns suitable for her wedding night which she designed upon herself. She gift-wrapped herself for a phantom bridegroom taking a shower and cleaning his teeth in an extra-dimensional bathroom-of-the future in honeymoon Cannes. Or Venice. Or Miami Beach. She conjured him so intensely to leap the spacetime barrier between them that she could almost feel his breath on her cheek and his voice husking « darling ».

In readiness for him, she revealed a long, marbly white leg up to the thigh (forgetting the fantasy in sudden absorption in the mirrored play of muscle as she flexed her leg again and again); then, pulling the net tight, she examined the swarthed shape of her small, hard breasts. Their size disappointed her but she supposed they would do.

All this went on behind a locked door in her pastel, innocent bedroom, with Edward Bear (swollen stomach concealing striped pyjamas) beadily regarding her from the pillow and Lorna Doone splayed out face down in the dust under the bed. This is what Melanie did the summer she was fifteen, besides helping with the washing-up and watching her little sister to see she did not kill herself at play in the garden.

The Magic Toyshop, Angela Carter 1967



Andy Warhol, « Twenty-Five Colored Marilyns », 1962
Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth