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Title: Spiteful Spirits. Projection and Blaming in Women's Lives.

Abstract: Using images and old stories I explore the need for blame and blaming which is often found to be strongest in those without power over their lives.

' Women are perpetually circumscribed-defined limited and controlled'
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Throughout history women's lives have been constrained to a degree that goes beyond the economic priorities which govern and affect different strata in society. Control has been exerted on women simply because of their sex. Whenever gendered attitudes fail to be recognised or acknowledged as equally part of political discourse, much social construct remains unexamined. In the past this allowed individual experience of difficult circumstance to be seen as having being caused by a malevolence. Struggling with disappointments and fears a common belief in 'bad-luck' would allow projections: superstitions, omens, spirits, to account in part for the lack of control women experienced over their lives, starting with their reproductive health and leading to their restricted potential and limited public roles. These images allowed a way of reacting to social forces which were unseen but informed attitudes towards women and governed their behaviour and experience.

Following on from the widow's curse, with its spite and invective (Prague:,March 2019) , this development will consider how such projections can be positive (imaginary friends, maternal projections,) or negative (spiteful spirits, household devils)in all cases liminal presences existing beyond the domestic sphere which has long been considered the norm for women.

Using my experience of being an unwanted daughter, I walk through the gallery of imagery, some real, some only existing in my imagination, to pull out the associations and attitudes which surrounds this maternal history and spend time among the presences who move between the interior and the exterior world, the unfortunate disembodied recipients of blame.

A walk through an art gallery which I frequented as a child takes me back to the various tales I was told.

Eve

Delilah

Medbh

Ophelia

Assorted Angels

There was a lot of blame back then which I was grounded in as the child of Irish Catholic parents, at a time when a mother was expected to have no life beyond her husband's. It was a late marriage (itself acknowledged as a form of Catholic contraception) producing many failed pregnancies and two living children, whom you might think would be wanted.

Unfortunately, I ruined my mother's life, from my first great mistake, of being born female, to everything I subsequently did. I know this because she told me repeatedly that her life would have been different, vastly improved, if not for me. I was the second child, not the first to trap her into servile motherhood, which she loathed, but my crime was worse on account of my sex. She had been trapped, according to her, a second time, only this time it was for something worthless. To my mother, girls were a waste of time.

It all started with Eve and her wretched apple. Her fault. Curiosity and knowledge were faults in women. When my brother won a scholarship to the Irish Xian Brothers' School she was proud, yet when I followed this act two years later with an equal scholarship for the F.C.J's Convent School for girls, she announced that I was trying to destroy her. The cost of the uniform alone, she claimed, would break the family savings and I was selfish to even consider going to a place where I would have ideas placed in my head. It was ridiculous educating girls.

Girls with 'ideas' were to be mocked, and feared.

I know I was lucky, my father overruled her that time, but throughout my education the threat of being brought out of school was held over me to enforce 'dutiful', or compliant behaviour.

The house was full of sprites and fleeting memories of things past.

I was a scapegoat, but that was not enough. My short span of years as a child could not account for the hard life and the disappointment my mother experienced through marriage, and while she wanted my brother to grow and flourish, she required of my life that it be as curtailed as she reckoned her own had been. She wanted retribution, and she required me to offer this.

The house offered windowless landings, places where dust and darkness collected and wooden stairs creaked with the memories of the long gone.

And here are those projections:

Someone was to blame for causing this life, washed up in a northern city in a slum area.

There were spiteful spirits at work. There was bad-luck (no other sort) and while my father lied about a glorious past, she sunk into the difficult memories of real experience, which became stories and tales of things inexplicable.

She had a ready-made battery of images to help her. And I used to escape, walking round the provincial art gallery with its idealised Victorian mothers, I left my mother to her nightmares: the single shoe in the hall, the milk spoilt and the mould blossoming on bread in the kitchen. Her unspoken grief for a life she had little control over, saw the wordless grief of the banshee, a liminal presence who disturbs the domestic interior, become part of her experience.

In the gallery I was being inducted into classical themes, biblical stories. Sampson and Delilah held me riveted. I feared Delilah's rage and revenge but loved her strength and will to carry through her promise, even as I hated it as an act of spite.

She told me she had never wanted me-and it was the pope's fault. What could she do, he was never wrong.

Source: *The Tain* Medbh cried from the womb, and disturbed the feast, striking fear into hardened warriors.

Her tale of my own birth was graphic, difficult to hear and couched in superstition, omens. Large crows gathered. The coldest winter on record. Birds froze to death and dropped out of trees, to crack on the pavements of walkways.

Source: 'The Punishment of Luxury' shows two women- floating over an icy wilderness.

The tales were full of punishment, of unwanted daughters, of girl children- abandoned. *Nanook of the North*, a black and white film, told of how the first nations people would take the first born and if this was a girl, fill the child's mouth with snow and abandon it to the freezing night.

Girls were necessary to continue the family, but only as breeders, and only after sons had been established. Sons were desirable. They continue the name, people would say. There is no law in the U.K. which demands this. It is a social custom. People won't think you are married, my own mother had wailed once she learnt I had remained 'McCorry'. I wondered what that had to do with anyone but myself.

Failure to consider these social roles & beliefs, failure to recognise how gendered attitudes were part of political discourse and acknowledge this 'mouth full of snow' allowed social constructs to pass unexamined.

In China the single child policy has had disastrous consequences as boys now outnumber girls by a ratio of ...

The journalist and broadcaster Xinran in 'The Women of the Hill' sees how women are not even second class. Maxine Hong Kingston in *The Woman Warrior* writes it was better to be dead than an unmarried pregnant woman in China. She writes about a woman who drowned herself in the village well, rather than inflict the shame of her pregnancy on her family.

From ducking stools to discover witches, to Pre-Raphaelite paintings of water nymphs, sirens and Ophelias the imagery of water is strong as a conduit for dead and otherworldly women. Source: The washer at the well.

Keywords: Myths, Folklore, Women's history, Mothers & Daughters, Imagery, Storytelling, Haunting, Projections, Spite, Blame, Engendered roles.

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