

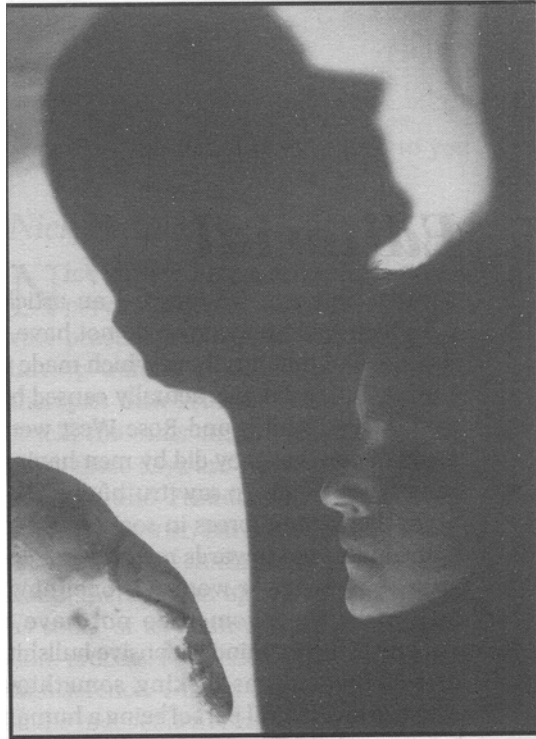
THE SHADOW

Shadow in Women

Sarah Inman

The shadow cannot be pinned down and cross-examined. The more we chase it, dive at it, fling ourselves on top of it, the more it eludes us. But all humans, being three-dimensional creatures of solid substance, cast a shadow, and if we cannot grasp it or hold it fast, or if we try and escape it, what is certain is that it will grab us by the throat and pin us to the wall. All we can do is face it.

To try and define the shadow seems a futile exercise. As fast as a definition comes to mind it slithers away into the darkness. The shadow is a jungian concept and Jung himself became irritated at his students' attempts to define it, at one point saying, 'This is nonsense. The shadow is simply the whole unconscious.' If the ego stands in the full sunlight of consciousness, then part of the shadow is what the ego cannot allow, what has been forgotten, suppressed or repressed, what the family prohibited and what the culture proscribes. But the shadow is fathomless and goes far beyond this. It



also holds our potential, what we might become.

Much has been written on the shadow, but it seems to me that the idea of woman's shadow, after approximately four thousand years of patriarchy, has seldom been addressed. What has been done to her during these millennia? Firstly, in the judaeo-christian tradition she has been blamed for all the sins of mankind. The first woman tempted the first man to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, causing god to expel them both from the garden of Eden. Churchmen even decided that it was heresy to believe that death was natural and not a result of Eve's sin. The fear of death has gripped

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man's soul, despite god's promise of eternal life in exchange for faith, and woman has born the punishment for this fear.

For three centuries the fires of witch-burnings raged throughout western Europe. Any independent woman who lived outside the strictest bondage of god-fearing submission to men was subjected to torture, mutilation, dismemberment and incineration. Men projected their most sadistic and violent sexual fantasies onto these women and acted them out in the witch trials. Children over the age of seven could be called as witnesses and their testimony regarded as sufficient to condemn their mothers to death. They were then flogged as their mothers burned. What price wisdom, independence, fortitude and healing powers?

Is this virulent stain upon our history one of the reasons why women go to such pains to avoid looking old, dyeing the hair, pinning back the flesh and pumping in the hormones? And who provides these 'services' to women? The crone is still an object of dread. She cannot be allowed to regulate herself, find her own pace, glory in her enduring body and live life to the full, taking an honourable place in society.

Throughout history, in practically all societies, genocide and unspeakable degradation have been the lot of many women. The rapes of Bosnia and Rwanda spring to mind. In India child brides were forced into marriage with old men, consummation being delayed, with great forbearance, until the child reached the age of ten, with resultant unimaginable injuries. Suttee, where a wife threw herself on her husband's funeral pyre, was considered noble, a worthy expiation of the sins (hers alone) that had caused his death. Now that suttee is illegal, widows

lead lives of such execrable poverty that they might almost wish it weren't. With the modern 'advantages' of scanning techniques, girl fetuses are aborted in vast numbers; in families too poor to use this technology, girl babies are murdered or left to die.

In China, footbinding of little girls continued until a couple of generations ago. The bones in the feet were broken and bound to form a three-inch 'lotus hook' for the delectation of their future husbands. Girls were unable to walk, their feet stinking and putrescent, their legs and lower bodies distorted, in order to satisfy men's fetishistic cravings — an orgy lasting a thousand years and involving five billion Chinese.

Genital mutilation is widely practised in Africa and other parts of the world. This excruciating torture, the brutal excision of any possibility of pleasurable sexuality, prepares girls for the enjoyment of their husbands and acceptance by their cultures. Whole women are outcasts.

The litany of violence and sadism continues. In the context of woman's shadow, a mere glance in the direction of fairy stories and wicked stepmothers just will not do. These are distancing mechanisms that make the facts palatable. The accumulated stench of centuries of burned and rotting flesh cannot be wafted away on the breeze of a few psychological insights. There is an argument for saying that women *are* the shadow under patriarchy. Women have no real substance, but consist only of men's projections, whore or madonna, sexually insatiable devouring vagina or untouchable virgin Mary, sexless, bodiless and pure. They have no power, except in the nursery, and this, of course, feeds into boys' fantasies of de-

vouring mother in an endless destructive cycle.

And where did it originate, this splitting of woman into two mutually exclusive components? In the expulsion from the womb, from the garden of Eden. It is thought that before the fall into a war-torn patriarchal mode of existence, societies lived in a much gentler, more rhythmic way. A triple-headed goddess was often worshipped, maiden, mother and crone. Transitions from one phase of life to another were cyclical and inevitable and there were no violent abscissions. Some time during the bronze age, with the advent of warrior tribes and violent death, the image of the crone was separated from her youthful, fertile and life-enhancing counterparts and she became an object of terror to be eradicated at any cost, and thus the split occurred.

It is argued that the change to patriarchy was necessary, that without the thrust of heroic, linear striving to consciousness we should still be wandering contentedly in the garden, unaware of our nakedness or that we exist at all. But either way woman is damned: damned by male psychologists for being unable, with her incomplete body, to provide the phallic thrust to consciousness; damned by fundamental religion for instigating that thrust by disobeying the lord, eating the fruit, tempting the innocent male and bringing sin and death upon the world.

One of the myths that reverberate most potently in the lives of modern women is the alternative Eve story, that of Lilith. It is said that she was originally created by god in the garden of Eden from earth, as was Adam, but an argument arose between them about who should lie on top. Lilith refused to submit to Adam, pro-

nounced god's name and flew into the air and thence to the desert. God commanded her to return, but she refused, so he had to make alternative arrangements (Eve, constructed from Adam's rib and submissive). In the desert Lilith copulates with demons, devours her own children and flies through the night seducing men in their sleep, stealing children and eating them. She thus represents the dark, devouring, demonic alternative to Eve, mother of the human race. Psychologists tell women that they should integrate both sides into their personalities. Why? I see no reason why women should want to incorporate the submissive Eve. Surely a more empowering vision would be that of bringing the shadowy Lilith out of the darkness of unconsciousness into the light.

Lilith won't submit either to god or to Adam. 'Let it be done unto me according to thy word' — she can't subscribe to that. In fact she's terrified of words, knowing how cruel, deceptive and humiliating they frequently are. She flies out of her body into unconsciousness to bide her time. In this unconscious state she is the shadow, whatever men choose to project on her: a *vagina dentata*, she will seduce, engulf and castrate; a child-devouring demon, she will swallow her children, denying them their separate identities. She will deny her own creativity and enviously try to destroy that of others. She will even consume herself, starving her body into submission until it is literally a shadow. This is the last vestige of power that she has.

There is only one way out. She must will herself into existence, fight and rage with every shred of her considerable strength and will. She must persist in the



face of overwhelming opposition and emotional blackmail, never submitting to the shame, despair, isolation and longing for oblivion that so frequently engulf her.

There is one woman who personifies this Lilith energy for me: Louise Bourgeois, the sculptor. She is in her eighties and has achieved universal recognition late in life. Fiercely independent, she has subscribed to no school or established doctrine, but has travelled her own solitary path, going to her studio every day to fight for survival against her demons of fear, isolation, humiliation, dependency and the hunger for love. She transmutes the dark, unspeakable wounds within herself, the failed relationships, losses and betrayals, into forms that have a universal meaning. Through her art she forges a connection with the world that speaks not only of pain and isolation, but also of love, humour, sensitivity and a rich and marvellous eroticism.

Louise flies to the desert for inspiration. 'I have the privilege of being able to enter the spell, to enter this very arid land where you are likely to find your birthright. To express yourself is your birthright. In the spell I can express myself.' Here she is speaking as the devourer Lilith: 'I break everything I touch because I am violent. I destroy friendships, my love, my children. People would not generally suspect it, but the cruelty is there in the work. I break things because I am afraid and I spend my time repairing. I am a sadist because I am afraid.' And here is the body as shadow: 'Since the fears of the past were connected with the functions of the body, they reappear through the body. For me sculpture is the body. My body is sculpture.' 'The process is to go from passive to active. As an artist I am a powerful person. In real life, I feel like the mouse behind the radiator. The move from passive to active is life itself. It means survival through your own will. I am not the victim, the other is. I am alive. I despise victims; I refuse to be cast as a victim.'

All this is, of course, my own shadow, that of a woman of christian/jewish descent living in western society at the turn of another millennium. My own early history is extreme and violent: conception in the early days of the second world war, violation in the womb and, at the end of the war, out of it, followed by repudiation. My shadow doesn't paint a pretty picture, nor can it be a whole one, but I have faced what I can of it as honestly as possible. Lilith is the archetypal figure that speaks to me most cogently. I had always felt like a ghost, that I'm not really here, and that the world is not a safe place to be. Now I'm angry, but certainly not hopeless.

I have tried to show how woman's

shadow has been unavoidably affected by the projections and penetrations that have torn into it from the beginning of patriarchy. There is, of course, another question here, about why the human species, alone amongst all sentient life, perverts its reproductive patterns and conflates sex and aggression. The state of play between women and men doesn't look

good, but perhaps in the next millennium a mutation of the species will occur which will enable the sexes to face each other in full sunlight, naked, fearless and unashamed, acknowledging each other's shadows, knowing that at noon the shadow is incorporated, but knowing also that as the afternoon progresses so, inevitably, does the shadow lengthen.

The Birth of Lilith

Furled in the dark she lies
motionless, dreamless,
waiting her turn
in a seminal sanctuary,
viscous, glutinous,
all her exits blocked;
banished from life, from light,
abused, excoriated,
rebarbatively cursed.
A visceral throb; she stirs
and shudders in her sleep,
unknowing, unknowable.
A rhythmic pulsing surges through her skull,
its vicelike grip rattling her teeth
and shaking the marrow from her bones.
Her nerve ends scream,
she slakes herself on blood
and wills it to an end.
She's thrust onto the sand
naked and quivering
bone and claw and sinew.
The sun bites her flayed skin,
bores through her flesh
and sears into her soul.
She draws herself together,
concentrates her will,
spreads her wings . . . and flies.