

Ideological Aporia: When Victorian England's Hairy Woman Met God and Darwin

By **Cindy LaCom**, Slippery Rock University

Introduction

<1>Early in Wilkie Collins's novel, *The Woman in White* (1860), the narrator and hero, Walter Hartwright, approaches a woman as she gazes out the window, her back to him. As he approaches, he rhapsodizes about her form: "Her figure was tall, yet not too tall; comely and well-developed, yet not fat; her head sat on her shoulders with an easy, pliant firmness; her waist, perfection in the eyes of a man" (24). As she turns to greet him, however, he is horrified to discover that "The lady is ugly!" Her complexion is "swarthy," her features masculine, and – perhaps the most damning sign of her unfeminized status – "the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache" (25). Hartwright literally recoils from the sight, and it can come as no surprise to us to learn that this woman, Marian Halcombe, ends the novel unmarried, an "odd woman" in more than one sense of the word, fulfilling the role of a merely platonic friend to Walter and to his true – and more traditionally feminine – love, Laura Fairlie.

<2>This novel seems an appropriate place to begin an interrogation of my question at issue, which is why, among the many "deviant" bodies exhibited in nineteenth-century freak shows, the hairy woman might deserve particular attention, for it is this contradiction, that moment in which we are unable to reconcile a feminine form and a masculine physiognomy, which begs to be considered in more detail. Because if what I call an "ambiguously-haired woman" is capable of provoking such anxiety and confusion in Hartwright, then women (real and fictional) who transgress those hirsute boundaries even more fully than Marion Halcombe – women with whiskers, heroines with hairy arms, damsels with downy cheeks, and freaks with full-blown hairy bodies – compel us yet more fully to contemplate the source of this such profound cultural anxiety. Why might hair "out of place" generate such concern? And why might "public" hair generate more concern than concealed hair? How do the visual elements of the hairy woman specifically shape cultural interpretations of her body? What ideological values might hairy women unsettle? And why, among the many "human oddities" exhibited in the Victorian freak shows, might the hairy woman elicit even more of a reaction than, say, the fat woman or the "human worm"? Women's hair has been imbued with cultural meanings for eons, but in the nineteenth century, that focus intensifies, and for very specific reasons. But first, some history and context.

Context: Women's Hair in Victorian Culture

<3>As Rose Weitz notes in *Rapunzel's Daughters*, hair “helps us to tell others about ourselves because it's not only uniquely personal but also public, open to viewing and interpretation by others” (xiv). Hair for both women and men has been an issue across time and across cultures—archaeologists have found evidence of depilatories in ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman cultures in the shape of everything from sharpened rocks to copper razors to resins and pitch, and in medieval and Renaissance Europe, women plucked everything from their eyebrows to their foreheads to remove unwanted hair. In Jewish culture, covering of the hair has historically signaled a transition from girlhood to maturity, and though there is no Biblical injunction for women to cover their hair, rabbinic tradition interprets “the custom of hair covering as a sign of woman's shame and feeling of guilt for Eve's sin [. . .]. Consequently, it became her responsibility to modestly cover her hair” (Bronner 470-1). Women throughout history have had a lot invested in removing facial hair, since hairy women have been aligned with witchcraft (think of Shakespeare's Wyrd sisters) and, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with insanity and criminality (Dreger 105). Today, the “management” of pubic hair in pornography remains an ongoing concern, and, on a very different level, many women with breast cancer have noted in interviews that the loss of their hair was more traumatic than the loss of a breast (Weitz 152).

<4>Hair has always been imbued with ideological meanings. However, as Elisabeth Gitter notes, “While women's hair [. . .] has always been a Western preoccupation, for the Victorians it became an obsession” (936). Both Gitter and Rose Lovell-Smith argue that Victorian women's hair comes to metonymically represent both sexual and class concerns. For instance, in Christina Rossetti's “Goblin Market,” Laura loses her hair after tasting the goblin men's fruit and metaphorically experiencing sexual rapture, and regains it only after her sister redeems her. And in H. Rider Haggard's adventure novel, *She*, Ayesha, the white woman who has ruled for two thousand years over a “savage” African tribe, veils herself because her beauty can literally kill men. When she finally unveils for the novel's hero and his sidekick, her hair, “let loose” as it cascades in rich torrents around her body, codes her as sexually dangerous. At the novel's end, she is punished for her political and sexual transgressions by being burnt to death, though her luxuriant tresses somehow survive the flames, and both male characters who have fallen in love with her take handfuls of her perfumed hair as keepsakes, which reflects a real Victorian practice of making artistic keepsakes from the hair of loved ones (alive and dead), a practice so widely accepted and rewarded that a portrait of Queen Victoria made wholly of human hair was exhibited at the Parish Exhibition of 1855 (Gitter 942).

<5>In terms of how hair marks a woman's class standing, we find one example among many in Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, when Mr. Brocklehurst, the director of Lowood School, a charitable institution, expresses outrage at a student's abundant curly, red hair; when the teacher tells him that the student's hair curls naturally, he replies, “Naturally! Yes, but we are not to conform to nature; I have again and again intimated that I desire the hair to be arranged closely, modestly, plainly” —i.e., in keeping with the girls' pauper status (cited in Rea 20).

“We Are Not to Conform to Nature”

<6>Mr. Brocklehurst's comment asks us to consider the ways in which Victorians might have believed in their ability to revise, but also to simply access and understand, a "natural" order in the world. The management of bodies becomes a major focus in post-Enlightenment Europe, as Michel Foucault so persuasively argues. Panoptic mechanisms encourage individuals to discipline themselves (and others), while a variety of discursive practices multiply to manage potentially "deviant" bodies and behaviors. In the field of disability studies, many scholars have argued that in addition to prisons, asylums, and schools, the freak show becomes one venue for the attempted management of potentially transgressive bodies, and further, that the nineteenth century freak show in particular comes to be invested by broader ideological concerns. Human monsters permeate mythology, and real human oddities have been displayed in various contexts for hundreds of years: the court jesters of Europe were often little people, and giants and conjoined twins (alive or dead) were displayed as early as the fifteenth century (Gerber 43). By the nineteenth century, traveling freak shows would have made "human oddities" a fairly common sight in England and America.

<7>A host of forces increasingly situate cultural attitudes towards and responses to human "freaks" within a scientific or pseudo-scientific context from the sixteenth century forward. John Greene asserts in *The Death of Adam* that "Before the seventeenth century no pressing need had been felt to group plants and animals into species, genera, orders, classes, and the like" (129), though I would suggest that one such instance of this kind of categorization occurs as early as 1573, when Ambroise Paré published *Monsters and Prodigies*, a tome which places the study of human "monstrosities" within the framework of "teratology," literally, the study of monsters. Paré catalogues and categorizes different kinds of "monsters" in an attempt to better understand their variety and scope, thus participating in a scientific discourse of taxonomy to create order from chaos. He joins a tradition whereby "Scientists pitted themselves against supernatural beliefs by seeking to demystify disability and other phenomena, and, in turn, place the inexplicable within their control" (Snyder and Mitchell 378). Richard Altick argues that by the eighteenth and certainly the nineteenth centuries, the display of human oddities has clear ties to the new field of archaeology, the evolution of the modern museum, and to the development of scientific paradigms for understanding the world. Finally, as Lennard Davis has argued, the development of statistics in the nineteenth century created a cultural emphasis on and belief in a scientifically verifiable "norm" which contributes in profound ways to the creation of and a new understanding of so-called "deviant" bodies.

<8>In the nineteenth century, then, the freak show becomes a stage upon which all sorts of cultural anxieties are played out and managed. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson has noted, one such anxiety is the colonization of brown-skinned peoples. One of many ways by which empire-building is justified is the display in freak shows of "savages" next to European human oddities, so that what Robert Bogdan calls "the exotic presentation," in which "the person [displayed] received an identity that appealed to people's interest in the culturally strange, the primitive, the bestial, the exotic" (28) becomes a prominent feature in the freak show. Thus, for instance, the "Missing Link" exhibit (usually a brown-skinned man) would shriek loudly, bang at the bars of its "cage," and eat raw meat in a performance of barbaric fury. P.T. Barnum's famous "What is It?" exhibit, one of his longest-running, displayed what was called a "nondescript," a category without explanation but with implicit ties to the "Missing Link" exhibit (see Cook). Such

displays referenced Darwinian theories of evolution to shore up racist and imperialist biases by assuring white viewers that England and America had not just the right but the duty to colonize the “backward” lands which were the home of these human savages. As Thomson puts it, “if science justifies dominant power relations, it also legitimates the dominant body, which is both the marker of cultural power and the ticket of admission into that power” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 77).

The Hairy Woman and Her Discontents

<9>David Gerber suggests that human exhibits in freak shows “are mirror images of what we fear we might become, if our inchoate and deep-seated anxieties about violations to the integrity of our bodies were somehow realized” (44). Given this, I want to argue that the hairy woman in the Victorian freak show deconstructs at a critical historical moment two paradigms —religious and biological—for explaining and understanding a potentially chaotic universe, and that that this is why she creates such extreme anxiety in her viewers.

<10>Women’s hair is subject to a scopic regime in the nineteenth century, the object of a cultural gaze which interprets it within specific ideological parameters, and this is taken to its logical extreme in the figure of the bearded lady and the hirsute woman of the freak show. If Marian Halcombe’s moustache marks her as existing outside feminine cultural norms, stigmatizing her as an “odd woman,” the hirsute woman becomes an even more overt receptacle for cultural anxieties about sex and gender categories and the potential slippage between a male/female opposition.

<11>Made spectacular spectacle in freak shows, hairy women were a star attraction. As early as 1650, when John Evelyn returns from one such show and records his description of Barbara Urselin as “the hairy woman [. . . with eyebrows] combed upward and all her forehead as thick and even as grows on an woman’s head” (quoted in Thomson 202), hirsute women attracted attention and earned freak show managers good money. Traditionally presented in elaborate dresses, ribbons, and frills, their femininity is emphasized even as their beards and bodily hair become signifiers which call into question a male/female opposition. In the nineteenth century, one of the most famous of hairy women, Juliana Pastrana, whose body and face were covered with hair, was billed as “The Ugliest Woman in the World.” Thomson notes that Pastrana’s body (and those of other hirsute women) “confused in several ways a number of the orthodox categories of being upon which the social structure was hung” (“Narratives of Deviance” 90), including that of sex and gender. I want to consider in more detail how and why such a confusion might represent more general ideological anxieties about the strict and so-called “natural” division between men and women.

<12>Numerous Victorian scholars have argued that sex becomes a primary category for understanding human nature and, by extension, social and political practices and contracts in the nineteenth century. If race and class become contested categories in the Victorian imagination, sex becomes even more fraught with ideological tensions, and as Mary Poovey notes, “almost all of the participants in the [. . .] battles for social authority assumed and reinforced this binary model of difference articulated upon sex” (6). In other words, sex distinctions become *the* critical

referent for understanding and insuring order in the world, and feminist scholars like Catherine Gallagher, Gilbert and Gubar, Jeffrey Weeks, and Mary Jacobus argue that numerous forces—educational, medical, political, and economic—combine to insist upon the supposed “naturalness” of a male/female division, and in ongoing efforts to reinforce this “natural” division, an overwhelming number of “Texts put[ting] forth a gospel of real manhood and real womanhood” flooded the market from about 1800 forward (Weeks 39).

<13>Well before Darwin’s publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, medical and philosophical texts explained “natural” differences between men and women in physical terms. But until the mid-eighteenth century, such discourses contributed to what Laqueur calls a “biology of incommensurability in which the relationship between men and women was not inherently one of equality or inequality but rather of difference” (154). Though early thinkers such as Aristotle, Galen and Hippocrates argue that reproductive roles mark men as “naturally” superior, most medical discourse between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries vests more time in noting differences (and often then only secondarily) than in using them to justify women’s inferiority to men. This changes radically by the beginning of the nineteenth century, when science and medicine combine to more emphatically wed sexual inequalities to sexual difference in a new focus on embodiment. There were a number of avenues for doing so. As Sally Shuttleworth notes, an increased interest in, even obsession with, menstruation on the part of medical men (and my use of that pronoun is intentional) contributed to an “increasingly rigid demarcation of gender roles that was taking place in the nineteenth century: a transformation over which the medical establishment presided, lending and indeed also in part deriving their growing prestige and authority from this process” (52). The conclusion of medical men – that due to menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause, women hover almost continuously at the brink of psychological breakdown – finds an echo in texts like Evelyne Ender’s *Sexing the Mind: Nineteenth-Century Fictions of Hysteria*, in which she explores the intersections between Victorian literature and medical discourse in constructing an ideology of women’s mental health as fragile, defective, and debilitating.

<14>Londa Schiebinger examines the ways in which science anchors women’s inferiority so that sexual difference is literally written in the bones, etched onto and into human skeletons through the proliferation of diagrams and drawings from the eighteenth century forward which exaggeratedly depict women’s larger hips and smaller skulls to explain their “natural” inferiority. As she puts it, scientists of the day believed that “If sex differences could be found in the skeleton, then sexual identity would no longer be a matter of sex organs appended to a neutral human body [. . .] but would penetrate every muscle, vein, and organ attached to and molded by the skeleton” (53).

<15>I agree with Schiebinger that “These anatomists’ interest in the female body was shaped, in part, by changes in the broader culture” (53). Industrialization changed the face of England, fostering the development of a capitalist economy and destabilizing class hierarchies; a crisis of faith further exacerbated cultural anxieties and efforts to fix categories which had suddenly seemingly come unmoored. A host of factors contributed to the deep ideological commitment to create order in what must have felt like a world suddenly become chaotic, and a male/female binary became a critical category upon which the weight of that order came to rest.

<16>Foucault's concept of an episteme applies here (and later, in my discussion of Darwinism), so I will review it briefly. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault defines an episteme as the historical conditions which exist at a specific historical epoch and which "delimits in the totality of experience a field of knowledge, defines the mode of being of the objects that appear in that field, provides man's everyday perception with theoretical powers, and defines the conditions in which he can sustain a discourse about things that is recognized to be true" (xxii). In other words, an episteme is a system or paradigm which allows "the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterized as scientific" (197).(1) It is a way of organizing knowledge based on assumptions and beliefs which come to seem natural and invisible, in much the same way that Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses naturalize human values and behaviors.

<17>During the nineteenth century, science becomes a very powerful episteme, a mode of organizing knowledge. And though I agree with Robert Young, who argues in his excellent essay, "Darwinism *Is* Social," that "biological ideas have to be seen as constituted by, evoked by, and following an agenda set by, larger social forces that determine the tempo, the mode, the mood, and the meaning of nature" (622), and though I disagree with Foucault's contention that a single episteme dominates a particular historical period, in my consideration of the "chicken-and-egg" question, I finally suggest that in nineteenth-century society, science comes to be a widely-felt and deeply influential paradigm within which the world is understood, one which, if it is influenced by diverse disciplines and discourses, is itself powerful in shaping other knowledges.

<18>Evidence of this abounds, not only in the eruption of interest in biology but in popular fascination with geology, chemistry, and paleontology, with the volume of essays devoted to these topics in periodicals, and in the development of clubs and organizations devoted to the study of these relatively new fields. As Himmelfarb notes, "From the 1830's [sic] onwards [. . .] geology was the most popular of the sciences[. . .]. At a meeting in Newcastle in 1838, over a thousand people sat through the regular meetings presided over by Lyell, while Sedgwick lectured to three thousand" (192). And this was an appeal which crossed socioeconomic and, to an extent, even gender lines; working-class men and women attended scientific lectures, women picked up axes to search for fossils, and even the universities incorporated the new scientific perspectives, so that science as an episteme comes to permeate the Victorian world-view.

Religion and Darwinian Biology as Failed Explanations

<19>For centuries, religion had provided the explanation for the distinction (and division) between man and woman. Though some biblical scholars have suggested that Adam was originally hermaphroditic, most Christians have historically accepted that God created Adam in His image and then, recognizing Adam's desire and need for a help meet, created Eve from one of his ribs; she is called Woman and they are named as husband and wife in Genesis I: 25. But as Thomas Laqueur notes in *Making Sex*, "By around 1800, writers of all sorts were determined to base what they insisted were fundamental differences between man and woman, on discoverable biological distinctions and to express these in a radically different rhetoric" (5).

<20>In this shift, biology and Darwinian evolutionary theories replace or are articulated next to biblical explanations to become the groundwork upon which the critical division of the sexes rests in the nineteenth century. In one instance, in an effort to defend what he called “natural knowledge” (and what we would today call the scientific method), Thomas Huxley insists that “if the religion of the present differs from that of the past, it is because the theology of the present has become more scientific than that of the past” (“Lay Sermons” 646).

<21>But in another essay, “Mr. Darwin’s Critics,” Huxley also writes, “I do not exactly know what Mr. Mivart means by an ‘absolute and pure Darwinian;’ indeed Mr. Mivart makes that creature hold so many singular opinions that I doubt if I can ever have seen one alive” (181). I would agree that “Darwinism” and “Darwinian evolutionary theories” are amorphous terms due to the many strands of evolutionary theories which develop, especially in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. In fact, the first section of David L. Hull’s essay “Darwinism as a Historical Entity: A Historiographic Proposal” begins with the subheading, “I. The Problem: What is Darwinism?” For the sake of my argument, I will define Darwinism as a belief in gradual transformation of species (though this was much debated in Darwin’s day); a belief in common descent; a system for organizing diverse species; a theory of natural selection (called “survival of the fittest” by Huxley, a phrase which linked it to economic and utilitarian theories of Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus); and a theory of sex selection.

<22>And it is well worth noting that though Darwinian theories were contested, often hotly, by the middle of the century, acceptance of the general *idea* of evolution was wide-spread. Bowler claims that “Darwin was successful in converting the scientific community to evolutionism within a decade or so of the *Origin’s* publication” (655), and lay reviews in periodicals were generally open-minded, respectful, and often accepting (with the notable exceptions Adam Sedgwick, Samuel Wilberforce, and Richard Owen, among others), so much so that even theological evolutionary theories never competed with Darwinian theories as fiercely as it seems they might have. Outright denials of Darwinism from fundamentalist perspectives gained even less momentum. In essence, Darwinism revised or “removed God but it reinstated the idea of order, equilibrium and hierarchy, this time in a social context” (Jones xiii). Thus, sexual selection explains why, according to Darwin, man is “naturally” superior to woman, and that hierarchy rests now not on God’s dictates but on a natural order, one which can be discerned through careful observation of “facts.”

<23>Herbert Spencer, interested in understanding how societies organize themselves, refers to sex differences to explain social evolution, concluding in *Principles of Sociology* that monogamy is the highest ethical form of sexual relation between man and women and, further, that “any extensive change in the education of women, made with the view of fitting them for business or professions, would be mischievous. If women comprehended all that is contained in the domestic sphere, they would ask no other” (qtd. in Rumney 124). His conclusion becomes part of a much larger attempt to stabilize the opposition between man and woman.

<24>But if the works of evolutionary biologists like Lamarck, Lyell, Spencer, Huxley and Darwin rewrite the biblical explanation of man and woman’s “natural” differences, they nonetheless continue to reinforce those differences rigidly, and ultimately, the new religion of

science, like the religion of the Bible, is challenged by the figure of the Victorian hairy woman, in whose figure the differences conflate, collide, and seem to collapse in a truly post-structuralist moment.

Chaos Out of Order

<25>Modern medicine has taught us that like gender, typically understood as a cultural construct, liminal and subject to trespass, biological sex is likewise an unstable category. In *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, Anne Fausto-Sterling provides overwhelming evidence that “A body’s sex is simply too complex [and] that there is no either/or. Rather, there are shades of difference” (3). In other words, sex, like gender, is a cultural construct, resistant to simple scientific verification.

<26>Ornella Moscucci suggests in “Hermaphroditism and Sex Difference: The Construction of Gender in Victorian England” that “Hermaphroditism acted as a bridge between male and female — categories that were commonly defined in terms of opposition and contrasts” (178). She argues that anxieties about homosexuality, transvestism, and the suffragette movement contributed to a changing perspective of hermaphroditism during the century but that ultimately, the hermaphroditic body can be read as embodying ideals of equality which move beyond a male/female divide by privileging the theory that sex differences are a matter not of essence but of degree. Though I find her argument fascinating, I find her conclusion that “bio-medical writers expressed their belief in the continuity of male and female and their faith in the universality of human nature” (194) too idealistic. The sheer volume of medical texts which work to shore up sex differences belies her conclusion.

<27>Wendy Bashant offers a different and, I think, more persuasive analysis of the androgynous and hermaphroditic figures in Victorian England. In an interpretation of avant-garde and pre-Raphaelite texts, Bashant agrees with Moscucci that many writers invest the androgynous figure with potential to challenge social conventions but that ultimately, “in a century firmly divided into man/woman, Parliament/private homes, politics/domesticity, the proliferation of the hermaphrodite finally signals an inability to control and categorise” (19), and that inability was seen as threatening.

<28>In an effort to corral and discipline the dangers embodied by hermaphrodites, nineteenth-century medical men worked furiously to find evidence that might prove conclusively a physical basis for sexual distinctions. To this end, by the 1840s, they were obsessively focusing their attention on ovaries and testicles to determine their patient’s sex, and they overwhelmingly bought into a “one sex” paradigm while increasingly linking sex with specific moral and physical characteristics. As Dreger notes in *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*, “Many men of science, following the footsteps of the great Charles Darwin, wrote with confidence and enthusiasm about the natural and profound differences of the male and female types” (26). This means that when they were confronted with an intersexed individual, medical men felt compelled to decide upon one sex for that person, regardless of the consequences and of any ambiguity which science could not explain.

<29>This leads to an obvious question: if, in biological terms, the intersexed person, especially in the nineteenth century, more fully presents a challenge to the male/female opposition than the hairy woman, why didn't that figure rather than the hairy woman become the locus of anxiety in the Victorian freak show? There are two reasons: the first is simply because though genitals might have been exhibited, photographed, and diagnosed in the medical arena, they never were in the freak show. When hermaphrodites (almost all fakes) *did* appear, they were displayed as bilaterally differentiated (Fiedler 183), their genitals carefully hidden from sight. Thus, as Fiedler notes, "a woman with much hair on her chin [. . .] is a euphemized representation of true hermaphroditism, which compels in beholders an ambivalent shudder deeper than that [caused] by any other Freak" (179).

<30>And that leads me to the second reason why the hairy woman embodied a challenge to the new science of biology in its efforts to provide conclusive evidence of a rigid male/female opposition: in purely iconic, visual terms, her body was, to the layperson in the audience, inexplicable, irreconcilable with what they knew about men and women. The average attendee at the traveling freak shows would know little and care less about testicles, ovaries, hormones, embryology, or the uterus and prostate. But they tended to trust what they saw, and when they saw a supposed woman with a ten-inch beard or with hair covering her whole body, despite her breasts, despite her frilly dress and lilting voice, they were confounded, amazed, and drawn to stare despite themselves and despite—or perhaps because of—the anxiety which she provoked.

Ideological Aporia

<31>Francette Pacteau argues in *The Symptom of Beauty* that "The grotesque body is a disarticulated body, whose [. . .] chaos threatens to externalize itself violently in the form of contagious symbolic disorder" (128). Though every "human oddity" exhibited in the nineteenth-century freak shows elicited wonder and, in many cases, anxiety, the hairy woman produced a particular and particularly profound moment of ideological and cultural vertigo, one resistant to easy categorization, closure, or cure. Theorists like Cixous and Derrida find potential liberation in such resistance. For Cixous, a feminist future depends upon the deconstruction of binary oppositions, beginning with the male/female opposition. She insists that it is "time to transform. To invent the other history" (268). Derrida argues that all transcendental signifiers are mythic and similarly invites us into a new order where our project is to undo and resist the structure of binary oppositions.

<32>But the abandonment of a fixed center, of a privileged reference, can have consequences other than liberation from those linguistic, cultural, and material structures which reinforce oppressive hierarchies. The negation of a male/female opposition in nineteenth-century England is especially significant if we accept that it acts as that center upon which so many ideologies rested: of class, of race, of ethics, of nature itself. And if both God and science fail to stabilize that opposition, then truly, that leaves the Victorian society reeling in a moment of existential terror.

<33>The hairy woman confounds that opposition in visually graphic ways—and if science in particular relies upon observation, upon the visual, then we are doomed, because she cannot be

compelled to fit into either category. What would this mean? At a time of profound and rapid change, the failure of both faith and science leaves the Victorians with no viable system for organizing their world. The hairy woman's figure undermined both Christian and biological explanations of sex divisions, and given the link between the "natural order" of such divisions and a wider "natural order" in the world, her hirsute body and all that it represented was then, ultimately, truly earth-shattering.

<34>Even today, in the wake of feminist, post-structuralist, and post-colonial theories which remind us that categories collapse, that boundaries blur, that meaning is not stable, most of us still seek out some kind of ideological taxonomy which provides order and structure. For many of us, a Kierkegaardian leap of faith is simultaneously impossible to believe in fully and necessary for day-to-day survival. We may acknowledge that the systems which organize our world are arbitrary and artificial, but we still cling to them. Nonetheless, we cannot ignore or turn away from that which thrusts us into the abyss of uncertainty; we may want to but ultimately cannot leap with confidence after our eyes, our senses, destroy the very foundation upon which our ideologies rest. For the Victorians, the hairy woman embodies that moment of existential doubt, and I believe that that is why she was so mesmerizing.

<35>In Collins' *The Woman in White*, Hartwright's recoil from Marian's moustachioed face is an example, writ small, of this vertigo at the edge of that abyss, of the ideological aporia of my title. Collins describes Hartwright's reaction thus:

To see such a face as this set on shoulders that a sculptor would have longed to model—to be charmed by the modest graces of action through which the symmetrical limbs betrayed their beauty when they moved, and then to be almost repelled by the masculine form and masculine look of the features in which the perfectly shaped figure ended—was to feel a sensation oddly akin to the helpless discomfort to us all in sleep, when we recognize yet reconcile the anomalies and contradictions of a dream. (25)

Though he claims to "reconcile" the contradictions between Marian's feminized body and masculinized face, I argue otherwise. The hairy woman is, in a specifically Freudian sense, uncanny. She represents that moment when we are forced to confront "something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (944). We work hard to repress that which we fear—that which threatens us—but the hairy woman, in a return of the repressed which the Victorian freak shows exploited, refuse to let us deposit our anxieties in a place where we can conveniently forget them. Fascinating, terrifying, monstrous, and compelling, she demands our attention and reminds us of the tenuousness of those ideologies which order our worlds.

Endnotes

(1) Though Foucault's concept of episteme has been compared to Thomas Kuhn's notion of a paradigm, I am not here necessarily equating the two. (^)

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Victoria had a strict upbringing and wasn't allowed to eat much as a child, so when she became queen she vowed to make up for lost time. She also ate her food incredibly quickly, which was a problem for her guests, as they were required to stop eating as soon as Queen Vic finished a course, even if they'd only had one bite. Victorian doctors did not treat women's "hysteria" with sexual devices. An earlier version of this post relied on a historical misconception on this point, and that item has been removed from the list. H/T @vagina_museum. Victorian Literature is the literature produced during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901) A.D. During this time, England was undergoing a tremendous cultural upheaval; the accepted forms of literature, art and music had undergone a radical change. The Romantic Movement, which preceded the Victorian Renaissance, had often portrayed the human pursuit of knowledge and power as a beautiful thing, as in the works of Wordsworth. During the Victorian age, however, there was a lot of radical social change and as such. Many poets of this time didn't like the romanticised version of society. The realisation that God's existence is neither observable nor provable drove society into a state of uncertainty.