

Orders from an unborn baby: maternal scepticism, vengeance and voicelessness in Alice Lowe's *Prevenge*

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In his discussion of the 'melodramas of the unknown woman', Cavell writes that melodrama and tragedy both 'classically tell stories of revenge', and that 'philosophical scepticism will in return be readable as such a story, a kind of violence the human mind performs in response to its discovery of its limitation or exclusion, its sense of rebuff by truth'.¹ For the sceptic, the fact that we cannot access fundamental truths about the nature of reality and 'other minds' leads to a shrinking away from life. As a result, the sceptic 'haunt[s] the world',² unable to rectify the desire to be known and acknowledge others with the fear of these very same things. Evoking the pre-symbolic realm, Cavell describes such a state as a craving for the 'nothingness' of our existence before language and its attendant 'games'.³ Provocatively, he hypothesises it as a gendered experience, suggesting it is not that

women do not get into the way of scepticism, but only that the passion of doubt may not express a woman's sense of separation from others or that the object of doubt is not representable as a doubt as to whether your children are yours.⁴

In my reading of Alice Lowe's blackly comic 'maternal horror'/revenge thriller, *Prevenge* (2016), I engage Cavell's notions of sacrifice, madness and voicelessness in the unknown woman melodramas. By placing them

1 Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 90.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 101.

in dialogue with feminist psychoanalytic theories of pregnancy and motherhood, I hope to build on Cavell's somewhat elusive ideas about the gendered 'difference' in scepticism. If a woman's 'passion of doubt' is not sourced in the provenance of her children, then pregnancy and maternity can engender different, if related, feelings of radical doubt. Rather than the object of doubt being representable as the question of whether your children are really yours, it can, I argue, be located in the relation of mother and child itself.

Through its critique of the tropes of the maternal horror film, *Prevenge* criticizes the patriarchal traps set for women, particularly mothers, and the limited options that women have to escape these. Ruth (played by a heavily pregnant Lowe) undergoes an identity crisis brought on by the horrible coincidence of her pregnancy and her partner's sudden and violent death. For Ruth, far from removing sceptical doubt, pregnancy and impending motherhood become mysterious and threatening, leaving her uncertain of herself and her position in the world. Seemingly convinced that her unborn daughter can talk, and is urging her to kill, she sets out to exact a bloody, merciless revenge on those she feels are responsible for her misery, the fellow rock climbers whose decision to cut a rope sent her baby's father plummeting to his death.

While she suffers the physical trials and tribulations of pregnancy – breasts unexpectedly leaking milk, difficulty in walking, phantom labour pains – for Ruth the psychological effects prove even more traumatic. Perhaps the real object of her anger is the patriarchal *idea* of that biological nature, one where the symbolic order (encompassing language and culture itself) is mostly off-limits to women, and mothers especially. Like Paula in *Gaslight* (George Cukor, 1944), 'the world of men [...] is destroying for her the idea and possibility of reality as such'.⁵ Unfortunately for Ruth and her victims, she wildly misdirects this anger, deciding to become both avenging angel and sacrificial lamb. Ruth seems to desire to 'exist [...] through absence',⁶ taking her place in a symbolic order that relegates the maternal woman to secondary status within paternal rule. As a result she eventually rejects society, her daughter and even herself, exhibiting a 'world-consuming' revenge⁷ and rejection of Cavellian acknowledgement so complete she is reduced to a ghost haunting the margins of human existence.

According to Cavell, the central male–female relationships in the unknown woman melodramas eventually break down due to the inability of the man to provide the woman with an adequate 'education', forcing her to strike out on her own to find it in an effort of self-creation.⁸ In *Gaslight* Paula ratifies her existence by finding her voice, which is now located in the madness to which her scheming husband has reduced her; in *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937), the eponymous heroine's ambivalence regarding the sacrifice of a certain *jouissance* in order to be a 'good' mother and fit into her ineffectual, estranged husband's world – a world 'not to her own taste' – eventually leads her to do the same through an act of walking away.⁹ But Ruth does not have the luxury of

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 50–51.

6 Sarah Arnold, *The Maternal Horror Film: Melodrama and Motherhood* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 172.

7 Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 6.

8 Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, p. 116.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 212.

walking away; she has already been left behind. Through his untimely death, Ruth believes her partner has abandoned *her*, and she retreats into fantasies of revenge for this perceived abandonment.

Crucially, the spectre of this absent male figure lives on inside Ruth's belly in the form of her unborn baby, who now becomes the source not only of her education but of paternal law itself. Ruth decides to acquiesce to that law after losing its embodiment. When she eventually realizes, with evident disappointment and incredulity, that her baby is 'normal', she cannot truly reclaim her voice because her sense of self is invested in phantoms: a dead man and the imagined subjectivity of her unborn child. Conversely, by articulating her own thoughts and desires through the conjured voice of her child, she is able both to deny that child's otherness and to assert her own subjectivity in the face of the crushing expectations that solitary motherhood brings. (It is no coincidence that the baby is voiced by Ruth/Lowe herself.) This internal ambivalence – a desire for acknowledgement, a wish to be erased – causes a 'splitting' in Ruth, indicative of the splitting of both the maternal self and the sceptic.

The women at the centre of the unknown woman melodramas, Cavell writes, are 'at some stage shown to be at a loss – not simply over the conflicting desires or demands between, as it is put, being a mother and being a woman, but over questions of what a mother does [...] and what a woman is'.¹⁰ For Ruth, impending motherhood poses such a loss. She claims she feels like 'a human sacrifice' to her baby's will. At the same time, her sense of self seems to be located in the baby. In 'Stabat Mater', Julia Kristeva details the feelings of otherness and alienation engendered by motherhood, describing a body that is no longer hers.¹¹ The experience of pregnancy 'outlines a special type of separation or self-estrangement in which the experiential spatial structures of one's own body are divided on multiple axes'.¹² According to Kristeva, pregnancy is a form of "'institutionalized psychosis": Am I me or it?'.¹³ Such identity confusion can elicit a sceptical crisis: 'The question "who am I?" is inseparable from the quest to confirm *that I am*'.¹⁴ Operating as it is in the imbricated territory between self and other, how could such a state of being, and becoming, as pregnancy *not* engender some kind of sceptical doubt regarding self-identity, other minds and intersubjective experience?

Cavell classifies the problem of scepticism (or response to 'unknownness') as one of 'splitting the other, as between outside and inside, say between perception and imagination'.¹⁵ The sceptic is tortured by the potential difference between the verifiable outside and the unknowable interior of the other. In pregnancy, this 'split' between the inside and outside can be located within the self (or rather, the self *within* the self), and it places Ruth on shaky ontological ground. Kristeva characterizes maternity as 'an identity that splits, turns in on itself and

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

¹¹ Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater', in Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 167.

¹² Sara Heinämaa, "'An equivocal couple overwhelmed by life": A phenomenological analysis of pregnancy', in *philoSOPHIA*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2014), p. 34.

¹³ Kristeva, qtd in Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double Bind* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 66.

¹⁴ Ludger H. Viehues-Bailey, *Beyond the Philosopher's Fear: a Cavellian Reader of Gender, Origin and Religion in Modern Skepticism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), p. 49 (emphasis in original).

¹⁵ Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, p. 90.

- 16 Julia Kristeva, 'A new type of intellectual: the dissident', in Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*, p. 143.
- 17 Although beyond the scope of this essay, Melanie Klein also famously proffers a psychoanalytical account of splitting, in which she articulates a 'paranoid-schizoid position' of the subject as 'splitting both self and object into good and bad with at first little or no integration between them'. For more, see 'Paranoid schizoid position', *Melanie Klein Trust*, <<https://melanie-klein-trust.org.uk/theory/paranoid-schizoid-position/>> accessed 21 October 2021.
- 18 Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, p. 202.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 220.

- 20 Viefhues-Bailey, *Beyond the Philosopher's Fear*, p. 146 (emphasis in original).

- 21 Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, p. 99.

changes without becoming other'.¹⁶ Ruth's split takes place within herself, and her own feelings and desires become the imagined desires of her baby, who becomes the personification of her anger.¹⁷ 'You can't shake me, I'm fury. I'm in you', the baby taunts in her sing-song squeal. Ruth might feel she is possessed – like 'some crap banged-up car' her baby is driving – but her sceptical impulse is to possess the other, to eliminate difference and destroy doubt. If, for Cavell, Stella Dallas has 'sure knowledge' of herself and her actions,¹⁸ Ruth takes great pains to deny a similar self-knowledge. Relinquishing the power 'to think for oneself, to judge the world',¹⁹ she instead decides to perform under command, the command of paternal law. As a result she exists ambiguously, unable to reconcile her own position in the world, or even whether she has one.

Ruth is not at home in the world. Alone and isolated, she appears frumpy and dishevelled, her face ashen and downcast, her hair unkempt as she moves through a series of institutional settings. Tears stream down her cheeks with regularity, but her expression generally remains impassive. She is clearly depressed. ('To use Cavellian phrasing', writes Ludger H. Viefhues-Bailey, 'the depressed person cannot *own* her words, her words do not express *her desire* or her vision and feeling of self'.)²⁰ It is only when she adopts other identities that she really comes alive. The various guises she assumes (doting mother, woman on the sexual prowl, job and flat-share applicant) are meant to lull her victims into complacency before she berates them for their perceived misdeeds and summarily dispatches them, usually with a decisive slash from a large butcher's knife. As with Stella Dallas, costume and performance become key to fulfilling her project, but differ in that they do not express Ruth's subjectivity but that of invented characters. She spends considerable time at the charity shop picking just the right skirt to convince her prey – the sexist, slovenly DJ Dan – that she is the (sexually available) woman for him. Later she flirts easily with handsome hipster Josh, while posing as a potential flatmate whose lover jilted her for a younger woman.

Pointedly, Josh is the first and only character who treats Ruth as an actual person; their conversation offers a glimpse of potential for a Cavellian sense of acknowledgment. As Ruth grows increasingly attracted to this friendly, likeable man, she dizzily collapses on his sofa in physical and emotional distress, blaming her pregnancy even as it is clearly Josh's genuine sympathy that confuses her. Cavell sees irony in the unknown woman melodramas as the negation of conversation; such negation speaks to the idea 'that men and women, in denying one another, do not speak the same language'.²¹ But Josh seems to desire to understand Ruth, who is playing a role but also expressing true feelings of despair and doubt. The irony here is that Ruth ultimately denies Josh not because they do not speak the same language, but because they potentially *do*. By negating conversation and removing the opportunity

for acknowledgment, she can persist in the fantasy that she is alone in the world and consequently untouchable.

According to Richard Rushton, for Cavell acknowledgment 'is a condition of what we call knowledge; that to *know* something is to also *acknowledge* that that something can be known by others'.²² But Ruth desires not to be known, emptying herself out in the hopes that there is nothing left for anyone *to* know. Instead she chooses to theatricalize herself in order to preclude any chance of acknowledgment. In a dramatic flourish before the film's Halloween-set climax, she paints her face in a startling sugar skull, a Day of the Dead motif resonant of her state of being (figure 1). She makes visible her absence: she is not just a bringer of death, she is, for all practical purposes, already dead.

Ruth still seems ambivalent about this non-existence. While she shrinks from the recognition of others, her self-theatricalization and murderous exploits feel like grandiose demands made on the universe to be *seen*. (Cavell links the theatricalization of the self in melodrama to the *cogito*.)²³ Such ambivalence again relates to a 'split': the sceptical 'fantasy of suffocation or of exposure'.²⁴ But it also speaks to a sceptical rejection of the ordinary. Ruth's scepticism 'hides the wish for exemption from the human [...] manifested in a craving to be exceptional', another 'invitation to madness' that Cavell relates to the sceptic's narcissism.²⁵ On several occasions she accuses her victims of being 'sheep' or 'puppet[s] on a string'. She views herself as special, going her own way in a sea of conformity, even as, to avoid the potential for exposure and judgement, she has convinced herself to act as such a puppet. In this way Ruth hopes to 'deliver her *cogito ergo sum*, her proof of her existence'²⁶ without owning her actions, or her words.

Ruth can be situated, as can *Prevenge*, within this ambivalence and ambiguity, a wellspring of masochism and feminine desire that, according to Sarah Arnold, characterizes maternal melodrama. Arnold views the depiction of the mother in modern horror cinema as exemplifying one or the other of the Lacanian Good/Bad Mother binary, either depicting 'maternal absence and self-sacrifice' or 'maternal neglect and selfishness'.²⁷ The Bad Mother is symbolic of 'matriarchy and maternal power', which are both 'figured as primitive, archaic and boundary-less, since they are not governed by language, culture, or the social'.²⁸ The Good Mother, in contrast, represents a 'constituting element of the Law of the Father' through a 'masochistic fantasy of self-sacrifice'.²⁹ Such self-sacrifice on the part of the woman/mother can bring about a masochistic form of *jouissance*, an ecstatic feminine pleasure found in pain which exists outside of language and is associated with the 'beyond'.³⁰

Ruth encompasses both poles of this Good Mother/Bad Mother duality. She is the proverbial Bad Mother, a 'primal scene' parent to her fatherless child who exhibits an almost primordial strength and fury. Yet

22 Richard Rushton, 'Acknowledgement and the unknown woman: the films of Catherine Breillat', *Journal for Cultural Research*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2010), p. 89 (emphasis in original).

23 Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, p. 10.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 157.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 160.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

27 Arnold, *The Maternal Horror Film*, p. 157.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

29 *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 15.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

Fig. 1. Ruth's startling Day of the Dead makeup, in *Prevenge* (Alice Lowe, 2016).



that fury is directed towards those who took away her child's father, a representative of paternal law that she desperately desires to reinstate. Her desire always undergirds her actions, but is not directed at any kind of patriarchal refusal. Instead she longs to be the Good Mother of the paternal order. The film's emphasis on Ruth's internalized misogyny underscores her warring impulses. As her baby says before Ruth takes her first female victim, the workaholic Ella, 'We [women] can be the worst, the coldest, the most ... ruthless'. Ella is not a mother, does not empathize with Ruth's condition, and refuses to offer Ruth a job because she is pregnant. To Ruth she is a 'merciless, frigid bitch'. Of course she could be describing herself, a woman without mercy who has sworn off sexual gratification for something else, the masochistic *jouissance* that comes through what she sees as self-sacrifice. The 'double-bind' that proposes women either identify with men in order to participate in the symbolic (personified by Ella) or 'withdraw into their silent bodies as hysterics'³¹ leads Ruth to become both a murderous outlaw *and* a desperate conformist, as her *jouissance* becomes 'complicit with the dominant patriarchal ideology'.³²

That conformity diminishes her subjectivity, and this is reflected in the expression of her own voice. Unlike Paula's 'mad aria of revenge' in *Gaslight*, Ruth's hysterical vengeance is characterized by voicelessness, another 'form of madness' that for Emerson is the hallmark of conformity.³³ According to Timothy Gould, for Cavell scepticism 'can be understood as a kind of failure of voice, though it is a failure that is likely to understand itself as a kind of success'.³⁴ Ruth has appropriated maternal sacrifice as a bulwark against the world's judgement of her, and against her own self-judgement, and this is manifested as a denial of her own voice, a failure masquerading as a triumph. In a pivotal scene, she serenades DJ Dan with Nik Kershaw's 1980s hit 'Wouldn't It Be Good'. 'Wouldn't it be good if we could wish ourselves away?' she sings, the line hanging thickly in the air of his shabby flat before she calls him selfish, and violently dismembers him. Her voice, then, calls for its own negation alongside the voices of others. By denying her voice, she attempts to deny radical doubt, but only manages to destroy her sense of self.

31 Oliver, *Reading Kristeva*, p. 108.

32 Arnold, *The Maternal Horror Film*, p. 171.

33 Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, p. 66.

34 Timothy Gould, 'Stanley Cavell and the plight of the ordinary', in Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan (eds), *Images in Our Souls: Cavell, Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 121.

35 Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 154.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 149.

37 Viefhues-Bailey, *Beyond the Philosopher's Fear*, p. 166.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 123.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 117 (emphasis in original).

41 Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater', p. 185.

42 Viefhues-Bailey, *Beyond the Philosopher's Fear*, p. 116.

43 Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, p. 16.

44 Viefhues-Bailey, *Beyond the Philosopher's Fear*, p. 103.

45 Julia Kristeva, 'About Chinese women', in Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader*, p. 147.

In *A Pitch of Philosophy* Cavell writes of the opera diva's voice as a vehicle for 'expressing the inexpressible'.³⁵ He proposes that 'we think of the voice in opera as a judgment of the world on the basis of, called forth by, pain beyond a concept'.³⁶ For Cavell this pain 'recalls the primitive terror of separation from the mother-breast monad in infancy'.³⁷ It is the pain of surrendering the plenitude of the undifferentiated 'all' feeling of the pre-symbolic for the world of language, culture, subjecthood and paternal law. This separation (which for Kristeva is achieved through a psychic 'matricide') engenders trauma, which forms the foundation of the sceptical crisis.³⁸ Drawing on Cavell and Kristeva, Ludger Viefhues-Bailey asserts that while the 'male skeptical narcissist' is 'driven by a desire to control that which is absent, next, or beyond',³⁹ the woman 'abandons herself both to the pain of not being in control of words in a world that is not hers and to the jouissance of receiving words from beyond herself'.⁴⁰

Cavell suggests motherhood should preclude a woman from a certain kind of sceptical doubt. But, as Kristeva suggests, it engenders another: This "'just the same"' of motherly peace of mind, more persistent than philosophical doubt, gnaws, on account of its basic disbelief, at the symbolic's almightiness'.⁴¹ Ruth's pain is the result of death, loss and transformation, but also of 'living in a world where there are no words for her'.⁴² Such a loss of words represents, for Cavell, 'an isolation so extreme as to portray and partake of madness, a state of utter incommunicability, as if before the possession of speech'.⁴³

Through her 'mad', narcissistic song, the opera diva conjures a pleasure found in abandonment and *jouissance*. Ruth's 'song' can be sourced in her baby's voice, a mad conjuring of and from the beyond. But unlike the opera diva or the unknown woman of the melodrama, her *jouissance* is rooted not in 'the capacity to judge a world that denies them their humanity'⁴⁴ but in a sense of maternal sacrifice, which can be read as a refusal of her *own* humanity. Such a 'masochistic *jouissance*'⁴⁵ is the *jouissance* of the Good Mother. Like another suffering mother, Stella Dallas, Ruth's (albeit more extreme) choices ostracize her from the community at large. But also like Stella (according to Cavell), her 'maternal sacrifice' causes her pleasure as well as pain. It is a testament, written in blood, to her radical otherness, functioning beyond the realm of symbolic meaning. That she will not openly acknowledge it as such speaks to the idea that she would prefer to see herself as the 'absent' presence that makes paternal law function.

When Ruth decides finally to own her desires, she abandons her newborn in order, presumably, to kill again. 'I thought I was doing it all for her, but I wasn't. I was doing it for myself', she admits. *Prevenge*'s title conjures a revenge for the loss of the pre-symbolic, or even the pre-symbolic's *own* revenge. But if this revenge can be classified as a victory over a patriarchal construction that diminishes women's subjectivity, it is certainly an ambivalent one. Ruth's murder spree is a perverse enactment of the *cogito*: she, like the unknown

46 Viefhues-Bailey, *Beyond the Philosopher's Fear*, p. 88.

47 Cavell, *Contesting Tears*, p. 64.

women, 'creates herself'.⁴⁶ But the woman she creates is more of a bloodless ghost than a fully fleshed human being. Personifying what Cavell sees as the 'human wish to escape the human',⁴⁷ Ruth becomes a hysterical hallucination, haunting the world rather than existing in it.

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