The Constructions of Fay Weldon, Woman of Letters

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by

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Dedication

To Leila Pearl

“They cain’t take ‘at away from me.”

And to Uncle Jerry, my ol’ Unca’ Pooge, from your professional student.

“You’ll get it.”

I wish I could have finished before you had to go.

To Claire and Michael

With all good hope for the future.
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To kith, kin, and colleagues, thank you for your always-positive support.

To Fay, like others of your readers, I’m struck by “morality tends to be what you can afford.” I too thank you for being able to afford to share so much of yourself with us.

To my True Believer, Bill, who brought the music into my life. I’d never have begun, persevered, or finished without you. Now you can stop keying and start playing again!
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The Constructions of Fay Weldon, Woman of Letters

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary British novelist Fay Weldon negotiates the postmodern "culture industry" as the self-conscious heir to a tradition of women writers dating back to the Middle Ages. Like her predecessors, Weldon defensively and offensively negotiates ideological constructions of womanhood, including injunctions to chastity, modesty, and silence; prohibitions against formal education for women; disdain for the literary production and commercial success of women writers; and the application of double standards in the critical reception of their works. Modernizing the strategies traditionally deployed by women writers, Weldon engages with the advertising industry and the mass-oriented literature of radio and television, using them to construct a career and a public identity for herself while advancing an alternative history of women in the twentieth and early twenty-first century. She exploits the distinctions between high culture, popular culture, and mass culture in order to provoke critical reflection; partly for this reason, her work deliberately resists academic criticism. The novels *Praxis*, *Puffball*, *The Cloning of Joanna May*, *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, and *The Bulgari Connection* explore the phenomenon Walter Benjamin described as the nullification of "aura" in the age of mechanical reproduction; they interrogate the connections between several kinds of reproduction associated with human gestation, women’s bodies and social identities, and language and literature. Weldon's interrogative fictions experiment with the novel form,
and their reception has been mixed, often splitting along gender lines. Feminists have not always embraced Weldon because she questions everything. Because her prolific output is ongoing, Weldon's achievement as Woman of Letters cannot yet be fully assessed.
Chapter 1: The Woman of Letters and the Cultural Construction of Womanhood

Introduction: The Ties that Bind

Till some household cares me tie,
My books and pen I will apply
—Isabella Whitney

Placing the constructions of Fay Weldon (1933- ) among those of her predecessors is the purpose of this research. As a woman writer and public intellectual, Weldon has consciously constructed her career, but despite her knowledge of postmodern, media-dominated culture, certain views of women that plagued her literary foremothers have also plagued her conditions of production and reception. Weldon came of age as a writer during the second wave of the Women’s Movement; her early novels privilege the lives of women without adhering to any one feminist party line. Increasingly foregrounded in Weldon’s later novels is human life restricted by the institutionalized constructs of late capitalism. Weldon’s critique of modernity reiterates fictionally the theories of certain philosophers of the Frankfurt school: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno theorize a culture industry with the purpose of forming citizen-consumers; Walter Benjamin theorizes that mechanical reproduction enervates culture with its inexpensive copies of works of art. Weldon works within these theories to

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1 Conditions of production are defined as the relevant context out of which the text was produced, including social and cultural history, the author’s biography and experience, the literary climate, and any special circumstances relating to the writing of the work. Conditions of reception are the conditions under which the work was originally and is contemporarily read.
interrogate and exploit the culture industry. In so doing, she has in some features of her career and literary production pushed beyond the accomplishments of her predecessors, whose conditions of production and reception must be established for comparison.

A web-like complexity has existed from the Middle Ages to the present among the self-constructions of the British woman of letters, the conditions of economic production, the culture industry, and the practice of literature. In a society where men controlled public language and the conditions and means of production, literary production and intellectual pursuits were identified with men. The intellectual woman of letters was nonexistent, invisible, or dispensable. Regardless of her genius or artistry, she was foremost a woman, the sex, passive receptor, virgin, (potential) mother, Madonna, angel (in the house), whore, and inferior being—physically, morally, psychologically, and intellectually. By the very act of writing, but especially by writing or speaking publicly, the woman—no matter the direction of her intellectual pursuits—dragged with her the baggage of contemporary constructions of womanhood and thus provoked myriad negative reactions. Society had particular, sometimes peculiar, requirements for the woman of letters, often conflating judgment of her personal life with the forms, themes, reception, and ongoing critical evaluation of her literary production and public voice—this held true even into the late twentieth century when Fay Weldon emerged as a professional woman writer, and later, a woman of letters.

To place Weldon among her predecessors the figure of the British woman of letters must be defined both operationally and historically. The term “woman of letters” is used here to mean a professional (i.e., paid) woman writer who has attained the stature of a public intellectual. A woman of letters participates actively in public intellectual
forums, speaking and writing through various media to interpret, influence, and contribute to contemporary culture. She may be a professional critic, scholar, or fiction writer (e.g., novelist, playwright, or poet) whose work has gained public acclaim—or notoriety—and who has used that opportunity to engage openly and publicly in intellectual discourse. As for historical definition, too much recuperative work has been accomplished in literature by women to do other than select samplings from literary history, both representative and illustrative, for analysis of Fay Weldon’s career. Thus to place Weldon among her antecedents, this research relies on the works of respected, late twentieth-century literary historians and critics: Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Mary Poovey, Elaine Showalter, Dale Spender, and Jane Spencer, among others. The most distressing finding of my research for this project is the historical paucity of women’s knowledge of one another’s work. This situation has negatively affected the emergence of many British women writers, Fay Weldon included, and it has repeatedly interrupted the overall advance of literature by women.

This chapter explores the conditions of literary production and reception as well as certain strategies of negotiation adopted by British woman writers before Fay Weldon. The chapter will also briefly summarize how those same conditions and strategies have affected Weldon’s career; Chapter 2 will elucidate the effects of those conditions and strategies in some detail.

Strategies of Cultural Negotiation

British literature during the Middle Ages and early modern period was generally constructed by court and Church. These institutions discouraged composition by women, but after the rapid spread of print technologies, the growth of the middle classes, and the
burgeoning of capitalism, it slowly, often painfully, became possible, and sometimes
necessary, for women to compose and market literary works. This centuries-long process
entailed mixed and changing circumstances in which women enlarged their literary and
intellectual endeavors. In fits and starts, more women gradually succeeded in wielding a
pen to earn a living; as a crucial adjunct, many also developed business negotiation skills.
Some, tiring of efforts to share literature equitably with men, eventually began
constructing literary space—only a room perhaps—clearly their own. Partial and
intermittent as the contributions of Mary Wollstonecraft, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf,
and Rebecca West may have been, they eventually fostered an intellectual, literary
tradition for and by women. Indeed, in the late 1960s, many intellectual women, writing
in a wide range of disciplines and genres, entered into a great project of locating and
recuperating the published and unpublished works and lives of their lost literary
foremothers. Much brilliant critical work has been done in the last forty years to
(re)locate women writers—their personal lives, public careers, literary production.

The emergence of the professional woman writer who openly sought monetary
reward, publication, and the fame that may follow is often dated from the later
seventeenth century. But from the earliest days of women’s writing, it has been
“women’s work” to negotiate methods of infiltrating the phallogocentric world of
pen(is) and ink. Since women have been seen as physically, spiritually, and intellectually
inferior—a construction in part enforced by barring them from formal education—a
woman taking up the pen flouted “received notions of womanhood” and invaded territory
reserved exclusively for men (Spencer x). However, the issues women faced after the
seventeenth century, and their strategies in dealing with those issues, are dismayingly
akin to those faced by women writing during the Middle Ages and early modern period. Further, such historical similarities reveal the lack of continuity in women’s literary tradition that has been lamented by many—Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Virginia Woolf among them. While writers after the twentieth century may suffer from an anxiety of influence, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest in *No Man’s Land* (1:167), worse for many British women writers has been the anxiety of no influence.

In the groundbreaking *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Elaine Showalter analyzes the emergence of the professional woman writer, that is, a woman who writes for remunerated publication—fame and fortune. At first, Showalter theorizes, professional women writers imitate and internalize not only the prevailing conventions but also the prevailing artistic standards and social ideologies. Eventually the writers come to protest these conventions, declare their independence, and claim autonomy. Finally, Showalter says, they turn inward from rebellion, away from “the dependency of opposition,” and initiate the search for self-defined individuality (12-13). For women of letters as defined here, a fourth phase of professionalization must be added: entering a sphere of shared intellect with the assumption of the role of public intellectual, speaking for and to society in a range of media.

Even with the addition of this fourth phase, however, Showalter’s point that the phases may not occur in chronological order still obtains. Showalter cites “periods of crisis when a shift of literary values occurred” (13). To Showalter’s focus on literary values must be added shifts in the ideology of womanhood: what it means to be a woman during a certain period of time dictates what social role(s) a woman may acceptably claim at that time. The four phases, then, often recur or overlap, sometimes within a woman’s
career, according to shifts in literary values, contemporary definitions of womanhood, and individual experiences of living at a particular time.

However, while such a progression of career phases may be loosely applicable to women, even the starting point, imitation, is problematic, for they were generally barred from the institutionalized venues of literature and the tools of production. Well into the twentieth century, women had to imitate or protest prevailing standards in intellectual pursuits because of double standards in education, politics, law, and finance. At the same time, women persisted in writing and speaking as they could, often prolifically. Thus, the definitions Showalter terms *phases* can also be viewed nondevelopmentally as *strategies of negotiation* that British women of letters used in different ways for 900 years.

Therefore, despite this chapter’s historical content, its general organization will be not chronological but analytical, discussing methods of negotiation used by women writers and intellectuals. These methods concern six identifiable issues: the secrecy surrounding their writings, the split consciousness they developed, their lack of institutionalized educational opportunity leading to auto-didacticism, the literature they created from personal experience, some offensive strategies by exceptional women, and their high productivity. I discuss each of these in turn for the remainder of this chapter.

Despite early discouragement and the anxiety of no (or little) influence, British women have persisted in writing for centuries, using various defensive—and occasionally offensive—methods of negotiating the phallogocentric world in order to construct themselves as women of letters in a largely misogynistic—occasionally philogynistic—literary field.
Secrecy: Anonymity and Pseudonymity

The safety of secrecy . . . Create a space for myself . . . Secrecy is power.
—A-man-da Cross

A persistent defensive negotiation adopted by literary women is secrecy. Secrecy took many forms with often unfortunate results, but as Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) pointed out in 1929, male-dominated society valued the chastity of women, seeking to control human reproduction in order to preserve ownership of the grounds of production. To effect control, men (and women) guarded certain sites—the female body (chastity) and the female public voice: education, reading, writing, and publication were seen by male-dominated society as endangering chastity and thus the grounds of production. Women wrote secretly or discreetly to avoid upsetting the familial and/or social order and, reflexively, themselves. As Woolf famously remarked, “I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman” (Room 49). Indeed into the late eighteenth century, having no room of her own, Jane Austen (1775-1817) wrote discreetly in the common sitting room, taking care to conceal her manuscript under a blotter when others entered. She published anonymously, and for little pay, novels that have been compared in literary excellence to Shakespeare’s writing. Her contemporary Fanny Burney (1776-1828) wrote secretly at night, and published anonymously or refrained from having her comedies performed because of her father’s objections. In the latter twentieth century, Fay Weldon composed in longhand because the noise of a typewriter disturbed her husband; she wrote while pretending to read or sitting out of sight on the stairs. Arising before the rest of the family, Weldon composed crouched on the kitchen floor by the coal stove. Although Weldon did not publish anonymously, she downplayed her work in the interests of marital harmony. At a dinner
party Fay and Ron Weldon attended in the early 1970s, the hosts insisted on viewing the pilot episode of *Upstairs Downstairs*. Ron reacted to the “trashy, popular, down-market” program with fury while Fay sat in “apologetic discomfiture” (*Mantrapped* 213). To preserve marital peace, Weldon disabled the family television set when the *Life and Loves of a She-Devil* aired in 1986.

Woolf observed that women had viewed anonymity as a “refuge” to be sought as “a relic of the sense of chastity that dictated anonymity to women even so late as the nineteenth century” (*Room* 50). Although the use of “Mrs.” and substituting the husband’s first name for the wife’s was a widespread social practice, certainly not limited to authorship, Gilbert and Gubar assert that some Victorians “established their allegiance to marital respectability by acquiescing in the couverture”: Mrs. Gaskell (1810-1865), Mrs. Braddon (1835-1915), Mrs. Oliphat (1828-1897), and Mrs. Humphrey Ward (1851-1920) (1: 241). Although Fay Weldon did not sign herself professionally as Mrs. Ronald Weldon, she seemed to acquiesce in couverture by maintaining a seemingly conventional home with her husband and children in a north London suburb. She was assumed to maintain a conservative, antifeminist viewpoint.

In the late twentieth century, Carolyn Heilbrun speculates revealingly that the practice of anonymous reviews at the *Times Literary Supplement* enhanced Virginia Woolf’s comfort: “[Woolf] must have liked the anonymous role at first; anonymity eases women’s pains, alleviates the anxiety about the appropriateness of gender” (*Writing* 40). Heilbrun’s 1988 speculation may reveal more about her own attitude than about Woolf’s; however, that a late twentieth-century woman of letters would so speculate itself adds to the evidence of anonymity as a refuge. Moreover, women’s supposed lack of intellectual
and literary abilities became a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy when reviewers knew the
writer to be a woman. To make it more likely their work would be accepted for
publication and to earn a living, women writers used either patently male pseudonyms or
androgynous pseudonyms. Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) thus justifies the androgynous
choice of names by herself and her sisters in the “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton
Bell,” which preceded the 1850 preface to *Wuthering Heights*:

> Averse to personal publicity, we veiled our own names under those of
> Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell; . . . we had a vague impression that
> authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how
critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality,
> and for their reward, a flattery, which is not true praise. (viii-ix)

Despite the “dream of one day becoming authors” (C. Brontë viii), in such isolated
situations as that of the Brontë sisters, women writers were unlikely to become women of
letters as defined here.

As Gilbert and Gubar note in Volume I of *No Man’s Land*, eventually “the
woman’s pseudonym began to function more prominently as a name of power, the mark
of a private christening into a second self, a rebirth into linguistic primacy” (241). In
other words, the defensive strategy may transform itself into an offensive one. Gilbert
and Gubar cite the example of Olive Schreiner (1855-1920), a British woman of letters
during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her husband, Samuel Cron
Cronwright, a lawyer and a member of the Cape Colony Parliament, adopted her surname
Schreiner as his own to honor her wishes. Beyond that, Schreiner published her most
popular and best remembered work, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), under the
given name Ralph to honor Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the surname Iron “as a signifier of an invulnerable new spirit achieved in the forge of change” (241). Although Fay Weldon did not adopt a pen name, her given name of Franklin, by concealing her gender, bestowed upon her the linguistic primacy that empowered her to study economics at the University of St. Andrews.²

Late into the twentieth century, the concepts of chastity and modesty over-determined women’s literary production. In Writing a Woman’s Life (1988), Carolyn Heilbrun (1926-2003) confesses that she wrote detective novels, or formula fiction, under the female pseudonym Amanda Cross because “abandoning one’s womanhood fictionally meant exposing oneself to terrible accusations and suspicions, far too risky for one working as hard as I was to maintain a proper wife, mother, role-playing mask” (115). As Heilbrun notes, during the 1950s and 1960s, “one did not create detectives . . . wholly without sexual thoughts or experience,” so Heilbrun’s pseudonym enabled her to participate in a literary form that would otherwise have compromised her personal reputation. Heilbrun also recalls writing under a pseudonym as an offensive strategy: “As I now perceive, the secrecy itself was wonderfully attractive” (116). Like Heilbrun, Weldon has been attracted to secrecy for the immunity it seemed to bestow. For over thirty years she felt impelled to conceal or obfuscate from public view certain facts of her life, especially those concerning sexual activity and the birth of her first child.

² This assertion I viewed askance until 2005. Then the furor broke over Harvard President Lawrence H. Summers’ speech explaining low numbers of women in science careers according to gender differences in mathematical ability and women’s hesitation to combine family life with a demanding professional life. Subsequently, Stanford University professor Myra H. Strober wrote an article that recalled her 1960s interview with a prominent Harvard professor to discuss studying for a doctorate in economics. The professor asked first if she were “normal” and then, since she was married, why she would want a doctorate. Harvard rejected her for the doctoral program in economics. (“Can Harvard Ever Plan a Positive Role for Women in Higher Education?” Chronicle of Higher Education 4 Feb. 2005 B14.)
Capturing hidden lives is indeed an admirable quest, as Woolf articulated so clearly, but internalizing hiddenness and anonymity can have disastrous results—anger, rage, despair. For instance in Daniel Deronda (1876), George Eliot (1819-1880) protests: “You can never imagine what it is to have a man’s force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl. To have a pattern cut out . . . a woman’s heart must be of such a size and no larger, else it must be pressed small, like Chinese feet” (573). As late as 1929, Rebecca West (1892-1983) was criticizing women novelists for their tendency to be what the public thinks they should be instead of being true to themselves” (“West”).

In Weldon’s case, this situation first manifested itself through technology. During her early career in television advertising, she assumed that only knowledge of the new technologies, which seemed to belong only to men, privileged one to write television scripts. Later, Weldon’s novel writing nearly succumbed to male criticism based on modernist principles and disdain for stories of domesticity. Secret and secretive conditions of production forced by social mores often resulted in women writers’ isolation, hunger for intellectual stimulation, resentment, anger, and feelings of “storylessness,” as well as a literary tradition truncated repeatedly into the twentieth century. Weldon experienced these feelings acutely during her ill- advised marriage of convenience to Ronald Bateman. After an early screenplay and novel were rejected, she felt intellectually suffocated as a stay-at-home, suburban mother and fled the marriage despite its economic advantages.
The most ambiguous result of secrecy is the concealment and repression of one self; this serves as both a strategy for overcoming confinement within a single, narrow story and a symptom of a sort of illness of split consciousness. For instance, “When Matthew Arnold disliked Villette [C. Brontë, 1853] because it was so full of hunger, rebellion, rage, he was at the same time identifying its strengths, but these were unbearably presumptuous in a woman writer,” Heilbrun writes (111). In the nineteenth century, paying Mary Anne Evans for essaying her critical intelligence in her writings seemed acceptable partially because she did not fit ideological standards for female beauty. However, to distinguish herself from writers of frivolous romances and to ensure that her psychologically perceptive, realistic fiction was taken seriously, she adopted the male nom de plume George Eliot. But after Adam Bede gained her literary renown, her identity as the unmarried Mary Anne “Lewes,” scandalously living with the married George Henry Lewes, was discovered. Thereafter, despite her success as a woman of letters, she endured much painful personal criticism. No wonder then that women writers and intellectuals, including Fay Weldon, manifest a persistent split consciousness that informs how they negotiate their personal and public lives, their individual conditions of production, and even their literary production among the contemporary cultural constructions of womanhood.

Eventually early women writers helped form an ideology of the woman writer and the beginnings of an ideology of the woman of letters. Even so, they still often distanced their personal lives from their work or suffered the consequences. Margaret Cavendish (1623-1673), who gained fame in England after 1650, seems to embody the results of failing to split her consciousness as a strategy of negotiation. Violating the ideology of
woman as modest and silent, Cavendish took the offensive by openly, insistently questioning contemporary ideology and pursuing fame in a literary career. She asks, “Shall only men live by Fame, and women dy in Oblivion?” (qtd. in Spencer 24). Her open ambition, lack of self-consciousness, and unfettered writings aroused accusations of madness. Similarly, Weldon’s lack of self-consciousness and her unfettered, outraged writings have drawn accusations of hysteria. But, overall, her darkly comic, entertaining fictions have found a willing readership. Weldon has continued deconstructing the culture industry’s process of citizen-consumers being “sold a notion or normality” (qtd. in Kenyon, Women Writers 195).

**Concealing or Revealing Sexuality**

*Punk and Poetess agree so pat.*
*You cannot well be this and not be that.*
—Robert Gould

*A little too loosely she writ.*
—Anne Finch

Women negotiated among contemporary and changing ideologies that conflated the expression of sexuality in literary production with sexual behavior in their personal lives. Women writers who did not construct their lives as “proper ladies,” according to “high moral standards” suffered from what Mary Poovey calls critical moments when ideologies shift (xiv). Although Poovey’s text, The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer, treats ideology in the works of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), her daughter Mary Shelley (1797-1851), and Jane Austen (1775-1817), women writers and intellectuals have suffered such devastating critical moments both before and after the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.
In the seventeenth century, women’s emerging wit was identified with beauty, their bold act of writing with romance heroines, and their proper subject with love. “Warmth,” or the overt treatment of erotic love, was especially popular and lucrative on the late seventeenth-century stage, which opened careers for several women of letters, but that same warmth became disreputable when the emphasis of literature began to shift to moral utility at the beginning of the eighteenth century. For example, Aphra Behn (1640-1689), Eliza Haywood (c.1693-1756), and Delariviere Manley (1663-1724) were eventually repudiated not only by the reading public and critics, but also by the literary daughters who were afraid to emulate them. Spencer sees the changes to Eliza Haywood’s reputation in particular as “a paradigm for that of the eighteenth-century woman novelist generally: at first praised as amorous, then castigated as immoral, and finally accepted on new, and limiting, terms [of] a ‘natural’ style that expressed feeling simply and apparently spontaneously, an evident moral aim, and a degree of diffidence” (i.e., modesty) (76-7). Although Behn was known to have lovers, she overtly resisted conflation of her life and, sometimes erotic, writing. Manley, however, embraced this conflation by declaring love to be a woman’s subject and basing her authority on her womanhood “conceived of as eroticism” (Spencer 53). Manley lived by her pen after her marriage to her guardian and cousin was found to be bigamous. But in spite of her protestations of innocence, her reputation was forever ruined.

In spite of increased emphasis on literature’s moral utility, it was during the eighteenth century that women’s writing seemed to come into its own in partnership with social, legal, and cultural changes in women’s lives. Grounding her work in the ideas of the American and French Revolutions, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote A Vindication of the
*Rights of Woman* (1792), pointing out how revolutionary democratic principles, if applied to women’s lives, would improve the entire social structure. Wollstonecraft’s work, in spite of its flaws, was both reviled and praised as only one of many flashpoints for conflicting views on women writers and intellectuals. Elaine Showalter argues that William Godwin’s precipitous and candid *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1798), which depicted their unconventional life together, “alienated other women and frightened feminists of her time and after, who kept their distance from Wollstonecraft as a precursor” (*Inventing* 38).

In 1911, Cicily Fairfield opened a seventy-year career as a woman of letters by declaring in her first essay for the *Freewoman*, a suffragist weekly: “There are two kinds of imperialists—imperialists and bloody imperialists” (“West”). Soon after, Fairfield reversed the practice of women writers taking male or androgynous pseudonyms by adopting the female pseudonym Rebecca West, a radical feminist character in Henrik Ibsen’s play *Rosmersholm*. This choice gave notice of an intellectual offensive penned by a raw, powerful literary voice. In spite of that, West consented to give birth secretly to the child of H.G. Wells in obscure Hunstanton, and to continue a decade-long love affair by meeting him covertly both in her residences and in London. Gilbert and Gubar, as well as other critics\(^3\), believe that “West’s part in the journalistic radicalism preceding World War I has been obscured in literary history by the attention paid to her ten-year affair with H.G. Wells and by her son Anthony West’s recent attacks on her” (*Literature* 1577).

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\(^3\) e.g., Marina Mackay, Bernard Schweizer.
Although Weldon too bore an illegitimate child in 1956, she avoided West’s situation, partially because she concealed or obscured the facts of the birth and her subsequent marriage of convenience to Ronald Bateman. She concealed not only her early irresponsible sexual activity but also at least one serious love affair. But with the 2002 publication of *Auto da Fay: A Memoir*, Weldon helped ensure that her literary reputation would not suffer as West’s did, for she revealed and interpreted the facts herself.

In the early critical moments of an ideological shift, Rebecca West underwent psychoanalysis, beginning in 1927. Virginia Woolf was also affected by Sigmund Freud’s increasingly prominent theories. Woolf recognized her work’s psychologically therapeutic dimension: “It is only by putting [the pain] into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me” (*Moments* 72). Rebecca West explored amnesia induced by shell-shock in *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), published a popular biography, “St. Augustine” (1933), based on psychological rather than spiritual principles, and sought out the psychological characteristics of World War II traitors in *The Meaning of Treason* (1947).

By the time Weldon’s career began, psychological principles had become common discourse. Her career and oeuvre twine interestingly with psychology. Along with economics, she studied psychology at St. Andrews and later underwent eight years of Freudian psychoanalysis. In 1985, she credited the process with providing her the self-knowledge to believe that she was capable of writing: “I was thirty, inadequate and depressed and ignorant, and knew it. Analysis was dreadfully painful and interesting . . . and necessary . . .” (qtd. in Haffenden 310). Similarly to Woolf, Weldon found that she
could consider her own issues by objectifying them into the thoughts and feelings of fictional characters. By age sixty, however, Weldon had repudiated analysis: “Talk never cured anybody” (qtd. in Rountree 105). Her husband Ron had moved in with his therapist, he and Weldon divorced, and in reply, Weldon wrote the novel *Affliction* about therapists’ power to destroy marriages. *Affliction* was roundly criticized and caused a furor. Turning from what West and Woolf had embraced, Weldon rejected the powerful and dangerous “therapy industry” (*Mantrapped* 192). Despite this, Weldon continues to construct psychological motivations for her characters’ feelings and actions. However, after situating them, she emphasizes morality even though “her moral framework is based on the concept of situational morality, validating the multiplicity of experience against a drive for a unified vision” (Barreca, “It’s the End” 181).

The widespread adoption of certain Freudian psychology became yet another ideological barrier to women’s intellectual pursuits: in the mid-twentieth century Freud’s theories about Oedipal issues, penis envy, and women’s roles, especially the mother role, were privileged as a way of viewing gender. For instance, John Bowlby found that during World War II in Britain, evacuee children suffered not bombings, poverty, and paternal deprivation of their soldier fathers, but maternal deprivation. Critic Elaine Tuttle Hansen categorizes Weldon’s novels through 1997 into mother-blaming, motherhood affirming, and an “uneven and unsettled” impasse (185). Weldon has suffered the working mother’s guilt and received much criticism for unorthodox fictional treatment of mothers and children.

Negotiation of the socio-sexual dilemma for women writers gave rise to a certain pragmatic double standard: in novels and conduct books, women desperate to earn a
living advised other women not to do as they did. Beginning in the seventeenth century, women novelists, especially, carved a marketable public niche for themselves by recommending the private, domestic life for their heroines; thus was born the marriage plot, the boon of pulp romances and the bane of, among others, Eliot, Woolf, and Weldon. Throughout women’s writings, the marriage plot has remained popular and lucrative, but later writers have interrogated its ideological dominance; for example: Eliot in *Middlemarch* (1871) and elsewhere, Woolf in *The Voyage Out* (1915), and Weldon most notably in *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983). Indeed, Weldon has dedicated much of her fictional oeuvre to illustrating the gritty reality subsequent to romantic love and marriage.

Beginning in the seventeenth century, conduct books for women became both popular and lucrative sources of income for writers. Valerie Wayne says that women who wrote conduct books “disseminated the dominant ideology but also modified received opinion in order to reflect their own interests and concerns” (72). Wayne’s observations, however, pertain also to other genres, for instance, to the evolving form of the novel and to contemporary self-help books:

The contradictory nature of the texts and those who wrote them reminds one that conduct books are sites of social dispute within a culture . . . as evidence of how [women] were told they should live and sometimes refused, or just did something else, or appeared to comply with ideological pressures but *preserved a private space from which they resisted appropriation*. (Emphasis added 72)
That private space from which women resisted appropriation is where Fay Weldon began her career as a novelist. Unlike the authors who prescribed womanhood in conduct books, Weldon explores myriad iterations of womanhood in her novels, which have been called survival manuals for women. In addressing a wide range of subjects, but always courtship, marriage, and maternity, Weldon explodes ideology by at once privileging and revealing the underside of domestic life. Having suffered from an eating disorder herself, she addresses bingeing in The Fat Woman’s Joke (1967), thus capturing a previously hidden life and openly questioning ideology—in this case, thinness as privileged.

Auto-didacticism

For centuries, women have lacked literacy; formal schooling in the classics, languages, sciences, and other subjects; books; and sometimes even writing implements, ink, and that expensive commodity, paper. Inequities in education were explored and lamented by such women of letters as Aphra Behn (1640-1689) and Mary Astell (1668-1731) in the seventeenth century, Catherine Macaulay (1731-1791) and Mary Wollstonecraft in the eighteenth, George Eliot in the nineteenth, and Virginia Woolf in the twentieth. But intellectual women often educated themselves, as did Margaret Cavendish in the seventeenth century, Elizabeth Inchbald (1753-1821) in the eighteenth, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), and George Eliot (1819-1880) in the nineteenth, and/or lived intellectually isolated or repressed lives, as did the Brontë sisters in the nineteenth.

Young Mary Anne Evans received a lengthy, privileged education and enjoyed learning and books; even after she left school at age nineteen, her father helped her
continue her studies, including German and Italian, by purchasing books for her. Even so, she well understood the effects on women of prohibiting their education. In the 1856 essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” Eliot calls for high literary standards among women writers and decries the danger of too little education:

If . . . a very great amount of instruction will not make a wise man,
still less will a very mediocre amount of instruction make a wise
woman. And the most mischievous form of feminine silliness is
the literary form, because it tends to confirm the popular prejudice
against the more solid education of women. (Essays 315-316)

In this essay, Eliot delineates methods, techniques, and standards of literary production; she also worries about supercilious, confused fiction undermining a high-culture tradition of literary and intellectual pursuits by women.

Also in 1856, George Eliot both lamented and rejoiced, “No educational restrictions can shut women out from the materials of fiction, and there is no species of art which is so free from rigid requirements” (Essays 324). The novel, or prose narrative, offered a form in which women writers could both record authentic experience and loose flights of imagination. In Three Guineas (1938), Woolf writes that women create unpaid-for culture by speaking in their own tongue. As critic Marina MacKay observes, Woolf “extols throughout the book the cheapness of ink and the accessibility of public libraries: the former is what allows women to write, but it is the latter that enables them to poach the high culture that has hitherto been prohibitively priced.” Woolf’s emphasis on the financial aspects of women’s literary production resonates with Weldon’s continual
articulation of the financial conditions obtaining in women’s lives and the culture industry.

During her early school years Weldon learned to love language through the study of Latin and reading the forbidden King James Version of the Bible. Her memories of early reading, as listed in *Auto da Fay*, do not include works by women. Like Macaulay, Wollstonecraft, and Woolf, Weldon interrogates the construction of education, both in terms of socialization and formal schooling. Unlike Eliot and Woolf, however, Weldon embraces popular culture while advocating high literary standards. Her novels seek to popularize intellectual issues. One of myriad examples is Weldon’s treatment of mirror-stage theory and the formation of subject position in *The Cloning of Joanna May* (1989). Overall, Weldon treats the novel form freely, speaking decidedly in her own tongue both to create and deconstruct paid-for culture.

**Forming Literature from Personal Experience—Alternate Paths**

*Women could write when they were prohibited from doing.*

—Olive Schreniner

*Of all women writers, only Jane Austen found a sentence to fit her.*

—Virginia Woolf

As Dale Spender observes, “Oppressive ideology excluding women from writing has been neither consistent nor entirely successful” (xi). Lack of access to the full range of literary tools necessitated that the mothers of literary invention adapt and create forms to express the range of experience available to them. Women writers wrote what they could and sometimes entered into the woman of letters phase, becoming active as public intellectuals. In *Poems and Fancies*, for instance, Cavendish speculates about atomist theory, entering “new areas of investigation . . . [and] other possible knowledge” (Price
She experimented with content and form, combining “metaphysical poetry with scientific speculation, philosophical meditation with fanciful fantasizing” (Gilbert and Gubar, *Literature* 93). For these efforts Cavendish was much criticized. So was Weldon in 1978 for including medically detailed chapters on human gestation in the novel *Puffball*, which sought to capture the protagonist’s experience of pregnancy in all its aspects.

Woolf points out that “letters did not count” as literature (*Room* 62). And yet, partially as a result of the air of illegitimacy surrounding women’s public voices, women writers became literally women of letters, adapting the epistolary form to confer upon themselves a socially acceptable voice in human activities: “Through letters, women who desired to write could bypass the need for formal education, literary patronage, editors, and publishers, and they often thus circumvented the censorship of a patriarchal literary industry” (Cherewatuk & Wiethaus 1).

Indeed, in the early Middle Ages the epistolary form encompassed a much wider literary range than current use of the word *letter* might indicate. In the largely oral medieval culture, the written word conferred much authority, and letters were often widely circulated, sometimes as public documents. Letters were written in both verse and prose representing travelogues, history, and legal claims, as well as personal correspondence. Although women were not allowed formal education in epistolary composition, they did adapt basic epistolary form; for instance, a salutation, conventional

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4 Epistolary form, codified in France or Italy, was known as “*ars dictaminis* or *ars dictandi*, the rhetorical study and practice of epistolary compositions” with five standard rhetorical parts: *salutatio*, or epistolary greeting; *benevolentiae captatio*, or proverb or scriptural quotation to secure good will; *narratio*, or statement of purpose; *petitio*, or argument made from earlier premises; and *conclusio* (Cherewatuk & Wiethaus 4-7).
phrases, and inclusion of proverbs. They negotiated epistolary space by writing visionary, spiritual compositions or personal letters in English vernacular, or even in the colloquial, to teach, influence politics, maintain familial ties, and explore innermost emotions (Cherewatuk & Wiethaus 3). Through the epistolary mode, women gained literary voice significant in the formation of the early novel, a vulgar but profitable form and often an epistolary construct.

Folding women’s adaptation of the epistle back on itself, Weldon wrote the barely fictional Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen (1984). In it Weldon purposely confuses fiction and nonfiction to deconstruct the literary culture industry: Aunt Fay, a writer, sends letters to niece Alice, a college student. Aunt Fay defines the realm of fiction, differentiates high and popular literature, and advises Alice to read the traditional canon before writing for publication. Ignoring Aunt Fay’s prescriptive advice, Alice writes and publishes a best-selling novel.

In addition to the epistolary form, there existed another path to becoming a woman of letters, especially during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—the theatre, acting in and writing plays. Spencer thus expresses the literary relationship: “Just as many early women novelists had roots in the theatre, the general idea of the professional woman writer had its roots in the image built up around the Restoration playwrights,” for instance, Mary Pix (1666-1709), Delariviere Manley (c.1663-1724), and Catharine Trotter Cockburn (1679-1749), and Susanna Centlivre (1667-1723), whose plays were extremely popular, more so than those of Aphra Behn, after about 1720 (29). In fact, Centlivre’s plays held the stage into the nineteenth century. Aphra Behn wrote prolifically: some fifteen stage plays, very successful farces, “warm” verses frankly
voicing sexual desire, prose fictions in a mishmash of forms—fictionalized biography, travelogue, romance, social tract, and again *Oroonoko*, which may also be read as a third-person slave narrative. Fay Weldon too enters the literary world as a successful scripter of plays, first for radio and television and then for the stage. She became a novelist to gain further artistic control. Television scripts, belonging in a relatively more public way than novels to the culture industry, must be interpreted by producers, directors, actors, and the camera. Furthermore, they are produced according to the scope of other production elements, not the least of which is the budget.

*Offensive Strategies by Exceptional Women*

*On[e] word of a woman shuld more than the wordys of xx men.*

—Margaret Paston

“Exceptional women are the chief imprisoners of nonexceptional women, simultaneously proving that any woman could do it and assuring, in their uniqueness among men, that no other woman will.” So says Heilbrun in *Writing a Woman’s Life* (81). Woolf wanted Shakespeare’s sister to be able to express her genius as he did. In “Women and Fiction,” Woolf says that “only when we can measure . . . the experience of life made possible to the ordinary woman [can we] account for the success or failure of the extraordinary woman as a writer” (*Collected Essays* 142). Although more literary production by women is likely still to be discovered, hidden away in attics and libraries, most works by women writers during 900 years of British history are extant today only because the women themselves were “spiritually or socially exceptional” (Gilbert & Gubar, *Literature 2*).
The fearlessly energetic Margery Kempe (1373-1438), for instance, took the offensive by justifying both her preaching and her use of the vernacular. She exemplified powerful alternative paths for women, especially in using language: “I come into no pulpit. I use but communication and good words . . .” (19). Another medieval writer was literally a woman of letters who had a strong public voice within her relatively limited community—Margaret Paston (c.1420-1484). Paston’s correspondence illustrates not only the differences between womanhood as ideology and womanhood as praxis, but also between practical and aesthetic writings. Writing in a plain style for household correspondence, Paston’s “dramatic prose” has “many features of oral narrative” (Watt 131), but, more importantly, Paston’s letters speak in a matriarchal voice of authority to her sons, husband, a shire court during a property dispute, and no less a person than the Bishop of Norwich, who “acknowledged the validity of [her] petition and promised to take immediate action” (Watt 135).

Albeit an unconventional seventeenth-century aristocrat, Margaret Cavendish was the Duchess of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and an attendant to Queen Henrietta Maria. Despite her privilege in terms of agency and autonomy, her literary pursuits, interesting to a contemporary reader for their broad scope, were held up to ridicule. But, as a duchess, Cavendish could be neither ignored nor entirely quashed. In “Female Orations” (1662), she took the offensive in calling for gender equity: “Let us converse in camps, courts, and cities; in schools, colleges, and courts of judicature; in taverns, brothels, and gaming houses; all of which will make our strength and wit known, both to men and to our own selves, for we are as ignorant of ourselves as men are of us” (96). Cavendish also broke with the ideology of womanliness by flashing her anger: “The truth is,
[women] live like bats or owls, labor like beasts, and die like worms” she wrote in a catalogue of outraged comparisons (95).

From the seventeenth century on, Behn was acknowledged as an exceptional woman of letters. A widow, Behn wrote overtly both for a living and for fame, asserting in the preface to *Sir Patient Fancy* that she was “forced to write for Bread and not ashamed to owne it.” As a picara of varied experience, Behn was better able than many women to negotiate as a public figure in the literary marketplace. Behn wrote a novel of ideas about social practices in various countries, interrogated those practices, and used a narrative strategy that examines the roles of woman and writer. Behn presents her female narrator as “authoritative, disinterested and sympathetic, with as much authority as a male writer and also with special insights gained from her woman’s position” (Spencer 52). Behn was openly confident in her literary production, demanded criticism from an androgynous point of view, and, like Cavendish, displayed the emotion forbidden to women—anger: “Had the Plays I have writ come forth under any Mans Name, and never known to have been mine; I appeal to all unbyast Judges of Sense, if they had not said that Person had made as many good Comedies, as any one Man that has writ in our Age” (Spencer 28).

In the nineteenth century, George Eliot, already established as a woman of letters, takes the offensive in the 1856 *Westminster Review* essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists.” In this classification of bad fiction, Eliot calls for women writers either to improve their standards for content, style, narrative strategies, and display of erudition or to desist from “the foolish vanity of wishing to appear in print” (*Essays* 323). Soon after, Eliot began practicing these principles, “produc[ing] novels not only fine, but among the
very finest;—novels, too, that have a precious speciality, lying quite apart from masculine aptitudes and experience” and becoming herself one of the few women writers whom she expected to exhibit subtle truthful delineation of manners, feeling, and character (Essays 324).

As an exceptional British woman of letters, Rebecca West practiced offensive strategies as a public intellectual from 1911 until her death in 1983. Born ten years after Woolf in 1892, and, in general terms, Woolf’s contemporary, Rebecca West benefited from intellectual stimulation during her childhood and an education at George Watson’s Ladies’ College in Edinburgh (est. 1870). Always aware of the need to earn her living, West was committed to the Suffragist movement and conscious of her writing talent at an early age. But her clear, candid, vigorous style did not falter during her long career. Unlike her grandmothers and sisters of letters, West simply assumed a space in public discourse.

Not only that, West helped shift ideology. Even the great feminist thinker Woolf consciously eschewed anger in the production of art—perhaps to her personal detriment. West, conversely, wrote highly critical pieces—often expressing anger and outrage. She baldly criticized “shoddy writing and sloppy thinking” in book reviews (“West”). She called H.G. Wells “the old maid amongst novelists,” a criticism that aroused his ire and attracted his sexual attentions (Weldon, Rebecca West 34). Nonetheless, she went on thoughtfully critiquing writers she called “her uncles,” Wells, George Bernard Shaw, Arnold Bennett, and John Galsworthy, thereby assuming herself to be family in the house of literature.
As a journalist, West wrote prolifically in on historically male subjects—public affairs, that is, national and international politics. Early in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941), a two-volume socio-political critique written from personal observation in Yugoslavia between the World Wars, West writes, “The word ‘idiot’ comes from a Greek root meaning private person. Idiocy is the female defect: intent on their private lives, women follow their fate through a darkness deep as that cast by malformed cells in the brain” (3). Certainly with this tome, West went far beyond Austen’s famed bit of ivory two inches wide and Eliot’s heart pressed small like Chinese feet. Paradoxically, Weldon manages both: with the foundational assumption that women’s traditional work in the home is as important as men’s or women’s work outside the home, her works elevate the significance of the domestic. And although she writes feminist novels, her female characters are deeply flawed, emotionally unstable, and often thoughtless—written so to illustrate the necessity, for personal liberation, of surveying the world, consciously and critically.

Weldon, too, is an exceptional woman. In contrast to the attitudes of Austen and Eliot toward their careers, Weldon openly defines herself as furthering the Second Wave of the Women’s Movement in Britain. She was undoubtedly favored by the British Broadcasting Corporation: during the 1980s, many of Weldon’s were successfully broadcast. Seemingly as energetic as Kempe and as adamant about using the vernacular, Weldon’s literary output is prolific and popular. Reminiscent also of Paston, Weldon employs features of oral narrative and speaks in a matriarchal voice of authority—even when reversing a previously firmly held position. Critic Jacqueline Pearson observes that “even by 1700 an oral culture had not been entirely replaced by a print culture, and
women participated fully in this oral culture as the special guardians of old tales, proverbs, songs, poems and ballads” (81). In fact, oral culture—storytelling, telling one’s life, one’s life experience—has largely impelled women writers and the Women’s Movement. Oral literature figures largely in Weldon’s fiction. Weldon’s life, like that of Behn, has been picaresque, her writing spurred by earning a living. Further, she has embraced anger both to fuel production of art and to incite readers to own their anger in the service of self-liberation. Weldon’s adaptation of the novel form has comprehensively expressed the saga of women’s experience during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Through deconstructionist fiction, Weldon fearlessly interrogates—and even predicts—the social ramifications of cultural and scientific developments.

High Productivity

£500 a year

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the relatively new medium of print helped those seeking to disseminate their work and to gain fame. Nevertheless, many writers of both sexes avoided mechanical reproduction through print, also to avoid crass commercialism or its appearance. Those who were not so fortunate as to have other income, however, endured the stigma of commercialism. Behn courageously made her need to support herself known, but critics still panned her productivity because ideology dictated that “writing for money implied depravity” (Spencer 28). Eliot excused women writers, poor in money and talent, who scribbled hurriedly to support themselves, their children, and sometimes their ne’er-do-well husbands: “We had imagined that destitute
women turned novelists, as they turned governesses, because they had no other ‘lady-like’ means of getting their bread . . . Empty writing was excused by an empty stomach, and twaddle was consecrated by tears” (Essays 303).

“Intellectual freedom depends upon material things,” wrote Woolf in A Room of One’s Own (1929) (108). But in the case of women writers, the material things often depended on a quick-march of productivity. In the seventeenth century, Elizabeth Inchbald (1753-1821) argued repeatedly with her husband to retain control of her earnings from the stage and emerged into the woman of letters category only after her husband’s early demise. A shrewd businesswoman, Inchbald refused offers of male support and lived to the extremes of frugality in order to write as she pleased. In contrast, Charlotte Smith (1749-1806) struggled to support eight of her twelve children after her twenty-year marriage ended in separation in 1787. The marketability of her work inspired publishers to pay her more than they paid most other women writers. But Smith complains in a letter, “I have no means whatever of supporting my Children during the Holidays, nor of paying their Bills when they return to School: & I am so harassed with Duns, that I cannot write with any hope of getting any thing done by that time” (qtd. in Spencer 10). Hurrying to produce novels, children’s stories, works of history and natural history for children, and a five-volume collection of narratives, Smith had little chance of achieving a high literary standard or becoming a public intellectual.

In the same vein, Weldon has asserted that morality tends to conform to one’s financial situation. Throughout her career, Weldon has emphasized the effects of economic forces on women’s lives. Like Inchbald, Weldon fought with her husband over her career. And to support her household of eight children (her own, her sister’s, and
Ron’s daughter) and her mother, Weldon wrote beyond Charlotte Smith’s pace, producing hundreds of works: plays, novels, short stories, adaptations, essays, and reviews. In 2000, Weldon scandalized the literary world by accepting a commission to write a product-placement novel for Bulgari, the Italian jewelry firm. She was roundly criticized, like Behn, for crass commercialism as well as for compromising the integrity of literature. However, *The Bulgari Connection* (2000) reflexively illustrates the interplay of economic forces among the worlds of fine art, business, and the very rich. While playing the culture industry against itself, Weldon participates in an intellectual life that Eliot and Woolf envisioned, and with a public voice as startling, though less politically influential, than that of West.

**Conclusion**

In recent decades, feminist literary historians and critics have traced the relationship between the construction of womanhood and the acceptability of literary and intellectual work by women. In exploring Fay Weldon’s construction as a woman of letters, on the one hand, and the construction of her works on the other, I have found that in spite of the passing centuries and three waves of feminism, some issues remain disappointingly the same. Weldon’s life and career as a woman of letters have been deeply affected by the same issues that affected her antecedents for 900 years. And her strategies for addressing those issues are similar to theirs: secrecy, split consciousness, auto-didacticism, forming literature from personal experience, high productivity, and, by dint of good fortune, being an exceptional woman.

Despite those issues and effects, Weldon has been able during her long career to travel beyond some defensive standpoints adopted by earlier women of letters.
Offensively (in all senses of the word, to some), Weldon writes with morbid, deadpan
humor, foregrounds female characters, writes almost exclusively about non-minority
middle classes, and publishes “ramshackle,” iconoclastic, faux didactic fiction (Sage
158). Unlike her literary foremothers, even recent ones, Weldon does not heed the
ideological injunction to remain silent, modest, chaste, and obedient. Indeed, she has not
been leery of anger, or even rage, as a source for her art, and she encourages readers to
tap ire as fuel for self-empowerment.

Each generation of women writers has written escape from the personal sphere
into, and as part of, their public intellectual voices. Each generation must negotiate space
within contemporary ideologies for the public voice, for now, as in ages past, a huge gap
remains between society’s ideal for womanhood, the actual experience of women, and the
acceptable expression of public voice. Somewhat like Woolf’s attempt “to encourage the
young women [because] they seem to get fearfully depressed” (Gordon, Room xiv),
Weldon’s repeatedly stated aim has been to deconstruct the ideal of womanhood by
portraying “what’s out there” for real women, in order to help each woman and
womankind integrate personal life with public voice. More than her grandmothers in
letters were able to do, Weldon has aided womankind by using capitalist-controlled
media to broadcast her voice as a public intellectual.

Throughout Weldon’s work, but foregrounded in her later work, runs a view of
human life as constrained by a scientific, industrial, technological, therapeutic model and
deadened by what Weldon dubs the ergonarchy, that is, life administered, reduced, and
compartmentalized by bureaucracy and red tape. This criticism of modernity resonates
with the account by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno of “The Culture Industry:
Enlightenment as Mass Deception” presented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by and who accuse post-enlightenment industrial society of forming citizens to ensure that “the simple reproduction of mind does not lead on to the expansion of mind” (100). The term “culture industry” refers broadly to the way late-capitalist, mass-mediated culture serves as a kind of political opiate that in the postmodern era produces the subject-as-consumer, that is, precisely the sort of subject that the system requires.

More than any previous British woman of letters, Weldon has been able consciously to access, and exploit, what Horkheimer and Adorno formulated as the culture industry, with the express purpose of startling readers from reproduction of mind into expansion of mind. By making her work highly marketable, Weldon exploits, and sometimes leads, mass-mediated culture. She uses the vernacular of popular culture—entertainment—in a literate, technological society in order to advance controversial, disturbing ideas and emotions, to interrogate conventional social roles, and to deconstruct mass culture. Using mass media—print, radio, television, cinema, photography—Weldon constructs herself and is constructed by reviewers and critics as an individualist, iconoclast, feminist, and sometime hypocrite who writes theorized metafictional social commentary in popular forms. In Weldon’s view, to ignore mass-mediated culture is to marginalize oneself and lose the ability to exploit the power engendered by its economic machinery. For a writer of literature, this paradoxical concept is at the root of certain disjunctions both in Weldon’s self-construction and construction by her critics. Weldon recognizes that even high culture and academic pursuits are at the mercy of market forces: “Remember publishers are commercial institutions—these days very vast ones—
who are increasingly unwilling to publish ‘good’ books because they can’t make sufficient profit on them” (10 Oct. 2001)⁵.

Themes of production and reproduction, that is, mechanical-technological and medicinal-scientific reproduction as opposed to natural or supernatural reproduction, pervade Weldon’s works. Thus, in addition to Horkheimer and Adorno’s criticism of modernity, I draw on Walter Benjamin’s theory on the loss of aura and commodification of the art work for my discussion of Weldon’s fictional constructions. Weldon sets in opposition two epistemological systems, one represented as the primitive, intuitive, pre-scientific knowing of dreams, visions, and the supernatural, and the other as the post-Enlightenment, rational certainty of positivism. Working purposefully within the culture industry, Weldon exploits and subverts it by writing Foucauldian cautionary histories as alternatives to the lives sold to female consumers by a capitalist society.

⁵ Quotations from the Fay Weldon Discussion List online are documented parenthetically by the date of posting. <http://redmond.com/weldon/discuss.html>.
Chapter 2: Fay Weldon’s Self Constructions As Woman Writer

Introduction

Fay Weldon’s sharp, often enraged literary voice brings to mind a harridan or hysteric, thus revealing the continued conflation of a woman’s personal identity and private life with her literary production. Weldon is neither harridan nor hysteric, and in fact, presents a frequent, positive mass media image in the culture industry in which image is as important as substance. On the small screen, Weldon seems both at ease and self-contained. On the electronic Fay Weldon Discussion Group, her posts portray her as available, comfortable, and confident. Occasionally startling, iconoclastic, or outrageous remarks, ubiquitously quoted by the British press, emerge no more forcefully than friendly conversation.

But, indeed, to study Fay Weldon as a contemporary British woman of letters is to study ubiquity. Her name, observations, and iconoclastic remarks, her public appearances and persona, and her prolific writings permeate British mass-communication media. Through the double lens of Elaine Showalter’s career phases\(^6\) and the strategies of negotiation by earlier women of letters as elucidated in Chapter 1, this chapter posits that Weldon’s career entrée to literature through the business world—the advertising and

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\(^6\) These phases are: 1) imitation and internalization of prevailing literary conventions, artistic standards, and social ideologies; 2) protest of accepted conventions, declaration of independence, claim of autonomy; and 3) a turning inward, away from rebellion, to initiate a search for self-defined individuality. These phases may not occur in chronological order.
broadcasting industries—has effectively positioned her to negotiate the conditions of literary production and reception. Partly because Weldon has experienced the internal workings and decision making of the mass-mediated culture industry, she understands the appearance of naturalness within a culture based on contingent, historical constructions (Culler 44). Like European Marxist culture theory, Weldon views mass culture, as opposed to popular culture, “as an oppressive ideological formation” that posits people as consumers who are “shaped or manipulated” by institutions, including the state (Culler 45). This echoes Horkheimer and Adorno, but Walter Benjamin theorizes “that ordinary culture can be transformed from an ideology into a ‘revolutionary tool.’” Any commodity, a novel for instance, can be deconstructed, through a depatterning or defamiliarization of the form, sparking a revelation in the reader. Then, according to Benjamin, the commodity must constellate into new constellations for meaning that may “illuminate the revolutionary potential of the present” (Yaeger 265, 266). Weldon believes that “[c]apitalism, not people, benefited mostly from the revolution that sent women out to work, earn and spend” (16 Nov. 2000). 7 Because she tends to view mass culture as ideologically imposed and repressive of individual agency, she accesses, through her fictions, modes of popular culture8 to empower a marginalized group—women.

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7 Quotations from the Fay Weldon Discussion List online are documented parenthetically by the date of posting. The quotations are reproduced exactly as posted.

8 Popular culture, literally the culture of the people, consists of widespread elements perpetuated through a given society’s vernacular. Popular culture is expressed through mass circulation in areas such as fashion, cuisine, and entertainment (e.g., film, sports, music, and literature). Post-modernist theorists do not accept the belief that there is some objectively superior high culture setting a standard from which to make evaluations of others. They have been more interested in popular culture as representing the voices of the previously silent, and by adopting the methods of film analysis or literary criticism they examine the way popular culture is produced and the underlying assumptions upon which its meaning rests. There are now
This chapter will analyze Weldon’s defensive and offensive negotiations as a woman of letters within mass culture. The chapter opens with an overview of Weldon’s ubiquitous presence in British mass media, that is, her work in advertising, book reviews, radio and television screenplays, public interviews, and pronouncements as a public intellectual. The development of Weldon’s life and works—in a context of (re)production, commodification, and exploitation within the culture industry—will be analyzed chronologically through early biography, mass media statements, the memoir *Auto da Fay* (2002), and the novel-memoir *Mantrapped* (2004). I will then explore Weldon’s early constructions of her public career and public identity, which show at once a capacity for constructing a public image and a lingering fear of revealing her own social transgressions. Finally, I will summarize Weldon’s innovations in the language of the novel as a genre.

**Negotiating the Cultures**

“Go to work on an egg,” the 1960s slogan for the Egg Marketing Board attributed to Fay Weldon, was cited in 2003, when a new campaign was announced in the *London Sunday Times*: “[S]ince Fay Weldon coined the slogan ‘Go to work on an egg’ in the 1960s, [advertisers have been] transforming the egg, in the public mind, from cholesterol bomb to nutrient-filled health food” (Clarke). Like Fay Weldon herself, the slogan has been absorbed as a staple of British popular culture. A television cook uses it on *Delia Online*, and in 2002, it headlined advances in human reproductive science. Earlier, in December 2000, the slogan “Go to Work on an Egg” was the title of a short story in the university degrees in Popular Culture—for example at Bowling Green University. http://www.bgsu.edu/departments/popc/index.html
London Sunday Observer: a mother was convinced that her single, workaholic-doctor
daughter should freeze her eggs to preserve the possibility of having children. The author
is Weldon, who, all at once, predicts the scientific future, interrogates women’s liberation
into the professions, turns again a well recognized turn of phrase, and exploits the
capitalist system. Using her past success and conflating it with her present status in the
title of a story published on Christmas Eve about past, present, and future—a feminist
intertextuality with Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*—suggests Weldon’s deft
negotiation of mass culture.

Although her public voice became recognized in the 1970s, Weldon’s place in
British culture remained in question, and because of her postmodern approach to nearly
everything, is likely to remain a focus of discussion. Her first novel, *The Fat Woman's
Joke* (1967), “told a decidedly proto-feminist tale of a housewife's anger toward her
philandering husband, yet Weldon's public espousal of domestic joys and the use of
‘Mrs.’ seemed to mark her as an opponent to the growing British women's rights
movement” (Dickinson). Despite the publication of a darkly comic novel about binge
eating—not then a construct common in public discourse—she seemed so conventional
that, in 1971, she was invited onto David Frost's television program to counter feminists
protesting the Miss World Contest as a flesh market. She created a scandal by affirming
their claims. In 2003, Weldon created another scandal for “hellfire feminist revisionism”
as an “ex-raver whose hot flushes have put an end to hot sex” because she views
recreational sex for women as a negative effect of contraceptive availability (Burchill).
“It [contraception] cheapened sex. We have had the magic taken away from us. Sex has
become practical and rather horrible” (qtd. in Press Association Limited). Even though
by 2003 Weldon had been recognized by some as “a national treasure” (Rurhmund), she
remains “a genuine iconoclast and connoisseur of hypocrisy” (Powers). But hypocrisy
might be an inaccurate word because it assumes a firm belief system from which one
covertly deviates. Weldon’s situational morality enables her to present
unselfconsciously, in the moment, whatever her latest observations may be. Such
spontaneity and dynamism energize the mass media audiences to whom she appeals.

Before the production of *A Catching Complaint* (1966) and *Poor Cherry* (1967),
when Weldon became a household if not literary name, she had written over fifty\(^9\) radio
and screenplays. Her early short play with alternative endings, *Action Replay* (1979), has
been repeatedly performed, and her first full-length stage play, *Woodworm* (1981), about
a Nobel Prize winner’s marital difficulties, was produced on Broadway. Weldon adapted
works for stage and screen, among them *Pride and Prejudice* (BBC 1980 version),
*Fanny, Jane Eyre, Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, and *A Doll’s House*. Her nonfiction
includes *Sacred Cows: A Portrait of Britain, Post-Rushdie, Pre-Utopia* (1989), *Godless
in Eden* (1999), and *What Makes a Woman Happy* (2006). She has published seven
volumes of collected short stories, adding masculinist to feminist concerns with *A Hard
Time to Be a Father* (1998). She continues her prolific production with *She May Not
Leave* (2006), her twenty-sixth novel. Especially well received in Scandinavia and
Eastern Europe, her works have been translated into twenty-four languages. *Darcy’s
Utopia* (1990) has been an extended best seller in Norway and the Netherlands. Her
books are so standardly popular in England that an evaluation of public libraries included

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\(^9\) This number may be unverifiable because literature produced for radio and television in the 1950s and
1960s was not well archived. In a list server post, Weldon writes, “Most of the plays were wiped to save
the cost of tape—a few still exist and are in the archives of the London Film Institute” (8 Mar. 2003).
Weldon’s novels as a criterion for the availability of books (Weaver). Weldon’s popularity and financial success enable experimentation with forms unusual to the culture industry. In 2003, she adapted the Gustave Flaubert novel into an anti-canonical play, *Madame Bovary: Breakfast with Emma*. In 2004, she published *Mantrapped*, a novel interleaved with personal reminiscences as they relate to her fictional constructions. In 2005, she adapted the French novel *The Devil in the Flesh* (1921) for the first opera written expressly for the cinema.

Weldon purposely blurs the margin between high and popular culture, understanding that binary opposition oversimplifies mass culture.\(^\text{10}\) She openly admits writing for money, but has spoken at the Modern Language Association’s annual meeting. As critic Siân Mile, who writes from a “punk” standpoint, points out, Weldon publishes in women’s magazines and appears at universities because such activities “look good on book jackets” (27). Weldon has served on of the Arts Council literary panel and the Greater London Arts film and video panel. She reviews books and judges literary contests, chairing the prestigious Booker Prize Committee in 1983. In 2003, Weldon launched the *Daily Telegraph/BASF Science Writer Awards*, commenting that “science popularisers help defend us from an alarming, almost religious retreat into irrationality” (Highfield).

For “On Trial,” the first episode of the British Broadcasting Corporation’s *Upstairs, Downstairs* (1971), Weldon won the best script for a series award from the

\(^{10}\) Mass culture is defined to be a “set of cultural values and ideas that arise from common exposure of a population to the same cultural activities, communications media, music and art, etc. Mass culture becomes possible only with modern communications and electronic media. A mass culture is transmitted to individuals, rather than arising from people's daily interactions, and therefore lacks the distinctive content of cultures rooted in community and region. Mass culture tends to reproduce the liberal value of individualism and to foster a view of the citizen as consumer” (*Online Dictionary of the Social Sciences*. Athabasca University http://www.athabascau.ca/).
Writers’ Guild of Great Britain. She won the 1973 Writers Guild Award, the 1978 Giles Cooper Award, and her novel *Praxis* (1978) was nominated for the 1979 Booker Prize. She was awarded the 1981 Society of Authors traveling scholarship, and the 1989 *Los Angeles Times* Award for *The Heart of the Country* (1987). *Wicked Women* (1995), a collection of short stories, won the PEN/Macmillan Silver Pen Award in 1996. In 1990, her alma mater, the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, awarded her an honorary doctorate. In 2001, she was awarded the Commander of the British Empire (CBE), an honorary award bestowed by the British monarch, for service to literature.

Despite high-culture activities and awards, “the melodramatic pleasures of both *Upstairs, Downstairs* and *Pride and Prejudice* run through nearly all of Weldon’s work” (Dickenson). Weldon has never divorced her “serious” literary work from her own enjoyment of women’s shared identity and community of interests: “The important thing is the opening of the mind to invention, the exercise of the imagination . . . the frivolous can be fantastic” (*Letters to Alice* 228). Despite having written a metafictional diatribe against romance novels, *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983), Weldon has attended the Parker Romantic Novel of the Year award ceremony. In 2003, she lived at the Savoy Hotel for three months as its inaugural writer in residence. Although Weldon’s residential life has been nomadic, she was first on the television program *My Westcountry* to recount a special connection to the Westcountry—her sojourns to St. Ives, residence during marriage with Ron Weldon, and her use of Glastonbury Tor myths and legends in *The Heart of the Country, Puffball, and The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. In all these activities, Weldon adjusts to the environment. Even though in her work she presents iconoclastic observations, like Ruth of *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, she is no
revolutionary. “She insists that the possibilities for overturning the system lie not in political revolutions but in revising the entire concept of power and construction” (Barreca, “It’s the End” 182). Nor does she feel any responsibility to provide audiences a unified vision of a disparate world.

Journalists of various kinds find Weldon more cooperative than do academics. In *Mantrapped*, she presents her participation in early publicity activities as unsophisticated. Like her literary foremothers, she found “anonymity a great pleasure” and difficult to forego (213). Exploring the effect of recognition and publicity on her marriage with Ron Weldon, she comments, “I had no trouble getting [recognition] and would talk to a journalist as to my best friend” (122). She assumed that she should appear exactly as she was, in everyday dress, without a trip to the hairdresser. But regarding publicity activities as career tasks, the duty of those in “the world of communication” and “a part of the complex game of perception,” she embraced her public image, learning to dress and pose in flattering ways for the camera (212). Later in her career, she underwent surgery on her eyelids, to alleviate a physiological problem and to look better on camera. She terms celebrity a “self-perpetuating” process of the culture industry. But however simply Weldon presents her early public persona in *Mantrapped*, it too is part of the complex game of perception. She asserts that she did not seek publicity, gave opinions only when asked, and answered questions truthfully. Postmodern truth must then differ from traditional truth: Weldon has often admitted that her answers vary according to whom she is talking and that she fictionalizes her personal life. Interviewed by Olga Kenyon in 1989, Weldon responds matter-of-factly, at times tersely. With John Haffenden in 1985, Weldon provides fulsome and nuanced responses. But asked if the
distressed marriages in her fiction reflect her own, she replies, “[W]e’re becoming too personal. I’m only personal in foreign countries, where nobody I know is going to read it” (311). As Mile expresses it, Weldon’s “[i]dentity, postmoderly enough, becomes unfixed, unbound, a free signifier, signifying whatever it darn well likes” (25).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Weldon interacted with students by posting to the Fay Weldon Discussion Group, an electronic discussion list dedicated to her work. One reply to a student query reads: “If Aygul send me her address I will post her a copy of Splitting . . . It can be very hard to get hold of books in Russia” (10 Nov. 2001). To a mistaken assumption, Weldon replies, “No, no, I wasn’t around in World War 1” (10 Mar. 2001). Instead of scolding a student for requesting information about a reading guide, Weldon explains her composition process for the novel in question (19 Jan. 2006). Weldon likely popularizes herself and gains young readers by disdaining literature as an academic discipline: “I write novels to be read not studied . . .” (18 Mar. 2001). And although she most often rejects being an expert on her own work, in the informality of the discussion list, she offers explanations of short stories and novels.

Shunning academia, Weldon embraces her works’ resistance to traditional modes of literary criticism just as early in her career she resisted canonization by academia. But she sold her archives to an American university sometime before 1994. They contain “letters to and from the great and possibly famous, and assignations with them—some of them are real and some are forgeries and some of them I just make up to entertain myself” (qtd. in Mile 26). As Mile points out, this comment too may be fictionalizing by Weldon. But decrying the possessions of consumer society in Mantrapped, Weldon

\[11 \text{ Quotations from the Fay Weldon Discussion Group online are documented parenthetically by the date of posting. The quotations are reproduced as posted. } \text{<http://redmond.com/weldon/discuss.html>}. \]
asserts, “My archive, the proper sum of me, is contained in the shock-proof, bomb-proof, temperature-controlled vaults of an American university” (242). Repeatedly disdaining literary academia in public statements, Weldon has profitably enshrined her work for future scholars.

Weldon had not reread Jane Austen’s works since her schooldays, until the mid-1980s when she adapted *Pride and Prejudice* for the BBC. Her study of Austen’s work prompted the barely fictional, anti-canonical *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen* (1984), which defines “literature by what it does, not by what it is” (10). The fictional Aunt Fay writes letters—actually social, historical, and literary commentaries—to her niece Alice, who reads nothing recommended by Aunt Fay—not Austen, Fielding, Tolstoy, Flaubert, or others—but composes and publishes a best-selling novel. Although in the action of *Letters to Alice*, Weldon deconstructs literary tradition, she affirms it formally through her use of epistolary narrative. She also distinguishes between high and popular culture:

[T]here is a copy of Jane Austen’s *Emma* here, and it’s well-thumbed.

The other books are yet more tattered; they are thrillers and romances, temporary things. [Their characters] bear little resemblance to human beings, . . . exist for purposes of plot, and the books they appear in do not threaten the reader in any way; they do not suggest that he or she should reflect, let alone change. But then, of course, being so safe, they defeat themselves, they can never enlighten. (8)

George Eliot and Virginia Woolf distanced themselves as women of letters from popular culture, but Weldon does not, and in fact interrogates the categorization of literature
itself. Illustrating a postmodern attitude toward authority and expertise, she queries, “I don’t think you can set out to write literature, because what is it? I don’t know. Perhaps if I had studied it, somebody would have told me” (qtd. in Kumar). Weldon confesses difficulty reading Virginia Woolf’s novels, except Orlando, which she found fascinating. Orlando likely appeals to Weldon because it is multiple and decentered: a tribute to and satire of Vita Sackville-West, an exploration of androgyny and gender-switching, a satire of biography, and an interrogation of biography-as-history, history-as-fiction, and meta-biography in a carnivalesque fairy tale.

**Literary Antecedents**

Like Mary Shelley, Rebecca West, and Virginia Woolf, for instance, Weldon comes from a family of writers. Although Weldon constructs her literary development as idiosyncratic and picaresque, her inherited talent with language, and her family culture of professional writing, factor into her participation in the culture industry.

Weldon’s uncle, Selwyn Jepson (1899-1989), wrote mystery-thriller novels, films, and radio and television plays. Weldon’s elder sister, Jane, who died of a malignant melanoma at age 39, wrote poetry. Weldon asserts that Jane had “the same hot line to the appalling infinite as [Cynthia] Pell, [Sheila] Fell, and [Sylvia] Plath” (Mantrapped 122). Weldon’s father, Frank Birkinshaw, a physician, wrote a serialized detective novel of more than a hundred episodes because, she says, he could not figure out who committed the murder. Weldon compares it to her serial novel The Hearts and Lives of Men with twelve planned episodes that ran to forty-nine (Auto da Fay 26-27).

Edgar Alfred Jepson (1863-1938), Weldon’s grandfather, edited Vanity Fair and contributed to The Saturday Evening Post, The Smart Set, and other periodicals (Pelan).
He wrote prolifically, over seventy novels, including bestselling romances of adventure, detective, supernatural, and fantasy fiction. His obituary in the London Telegraph described Jepson as “a distinctive craftsman of remarkable personality,” whose many friends included Joseph Conrad, T. S. Eliot, Ford Maddox Ford, Walter de la Mare, Ezra Pound, and H. G. Wells (Auto 14, 16, 17). Although Weldon never knew Jepson, a description of his place in literature prescribes Weldon’s negotiation between high and popular culture: “too much the pragmatic commercial writer to be a real decadent and too much the man of letters to be entirely suitable in the guise of a mere commercial wordsmith” (Pelan).

Weldon’s mother, Margaret Jepson Birkinshaw (1907-2003), serves as a complex role model. Birkinshaw “kept the company of Evelyn Waugh and his gang of friends, she was at home in literary soirées. . . .” (Auto 2-3). In 1934, at 27, Birkinshaw published her first novel, Via Panama. It was well received in both England and America and was also praised by George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells. Again prescribing Weldon, H.G. Wells asserted, “That young woman can write. She knows no fear, and she has wisdom” (“Margaret Birkinshaw”). To support herself and her daughters when her marriage failed, Birkinshaw earned a desperate living as a novelist, a journalist, a writer of screenplays, and an advertising copywriter. She wrote serialized adventure-romances, e.g., Velvet and Steel, The Cups of Alexander, to be published in London, but World War II ended the transport of manuscripts and contracts by ship. Birkinshaw took a job “running a small advertising agency, writing copy, pasting up layouts, and making film strips for the National Film Library” (Auto 6). Although the progression of Birkinshaw’s career reverses Weldon’s, the similarities are remarkable. But more significant is the
influence of material deprivation and maternal desperation on a daughter observant and sensitive enough to absorb their impact.

Moreover, Birkinshaw demonstrated acute awareness of the conflict between literary and commercial values by adopting the pen name Pearl Bellairs, a character in Aldous Huxley’s first published short story “The Farcical History of Richard Greenow” (1920). In the story, Greenow discovers that he has generated within himself a female writer of sentimental novels, whose five thousand words a night provide him a very respectable income while he “forges a brilliant career in political journalism” (Squier, “Embryologies” 4). With the name Pearl Bellairs, Birkinshaw tells the literary world, “I can do better than this, I am worth more than this, it’s just I have to make a living” (Auto 46). In secret, Birkinshaw began a treatise on morality and aesthetics, “thousands of overwritten pages, which would get in a hopeless muddle on the kitchen table” (Auto 44). She worked on it intermittently but never finished it. Reviewer Alex Clark speculates about the effect on Weldon: “with her nascent sense of the importance of stemming chaos . . . perhaps this is why her own novels are rarely long, and could, not uncharitably, be described as verging on underwritten.”

Despite penury, Birkinshaw stopped writing novels because, “It unsettles people and puts ideas into their heads, false hopes, false expectations. . . . It’s immoral” (Mantrapped 180). Weldon denies direct influence by her mother’s writings. However, Birkinshaw’s influence may show in Weldon’s attitude: “I don’t write role models for women: too dangerous—emotional correctness may lead to a better society, but seldom to personal happiness!” (27 Oct. 2002). Birkinshaw’s position toward the novel form may also have influenced Weldon’s position: “readers … will quarrel with the content of
a novel, but not doubt the whole concept of the novel” (Letters to Alice 24). Although Weldon’s detractors have criticized her postmodern view of this form, many critics and readers, especially feminists, celebrate it.

**Education and Auto-didacticism**

In contrast to the women writers discussed in Chapter 1, Weldon received not only a formal education but also an extracurricular literary education attributable to the intellectual atmosphere created by her mother and grandmother, a concert pianist. Until the publication of Auto da Fay in 2002, Weldon downplayed her literary antecedents and extensive, if informal, literary education. However, as a voracious young reader, she read Hans Christian Anderson, the Arthur Mee Fairy Books, J. R. R. Tolkien, Jules Verne, Olaf Stapledon, H. G. Wells, and Rider Haggard, among others. During long walks, her mother recited poetry, e.g., Tennyson, Byron, and Keats. Her father paid her sixpence for each one of Shakespeare’s sonnets she could recite, and she memorized “The Lady of Shalott” and John Stuart Mill’s “On Liberty.” In disobedience to the nuns at St. Mary’s Convent school in Christchurch, she read the King James Version of the Bible: “I fell in love with language. . . I wrestled with the notion of the hills lifting themselves up and the valleys being exalted” (Auto 57). She remembers studying Latin, loving “the sound, meter and wit of this language . . . which paid such vigorous tribute to the exact order of event, the exact placing of words for maximum effect, maximum irony” (Auto 140). Later, Weldon read Graham Greene, Thomas Hardy, Sinclair Lewis, Aldous Huxley, Upton Sinclair, G.B. Shaw, Leo Tolstoy, Evelyn Waugh, H.G. Wells, and Thomas Wolfe, a canonical, and male, list. Weldon lists the “low tastes” of her teen years—the romances of Georgette Heyer, the detective mysteries of Raymond Chandler and Agatha Christie,
and “blockbusters out of Hollywood, thrillers . . .” (Auto 141). She names She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed (Haggard, 1923), read at only ten, as a favorite. She compares its archetypical theme—a fortunate woman losing everything through greed—to the same theme in The Life and Loves of a She-Devil and The Bulgari Connection. Discussion list contributor Bernadette Power cites a similar common trope in Growing Rich (1992), Darcy’s Utopia (1990), and Big Women (1997) of “the capable resourceful daughter from the completely hopeless family who manages some sort of social mobility through paid work, then becomes vile and heartless” (14 Jan. 2001). Weldon’s claim not to know what literature is, then, flickers and fades given her extensive reading, reviewing and judging of literary contests, and publications of, especially, Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen.

**Doing and Writing in the Workforce**

Unlike many of her foremothers, Weldon was able to do, not just write. After graduating from St. Andrew’s University with a master’s degree in economics and psychology in 1956,12 Weldon began her career through a position in the Foreign Office. She gathered information and wrote pamphlets to be dropped over Poland during the Cold War. This first phase of Weldon’s writing career corresponds to Elaine Showalter’s “feminine” phase of women’s writing—imitating prevailing modes of the dominant tradition. “I wrote papers for my masters on the state of coal-mining, housing, education and so on behind the Iron Curtain, and understood that it was my task to present the worst picture and not the best of what was going on.” From the vantage point of fifty years

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12 Likely Weldon graduated in 1956, but in standard reference works her graduation has also been reported as 1952 and 1954.
experience Weldon defines the anomaly: “But wherever I have been it is the same: very few people are interested in the truth, most would rather have their preconceptions confirmed than bother to alter them” (Auto 243). To maneuver readers into looking at the truth and resisting the dictates of mass culture, Weldon uses lessons from the advertising industry: make the view pleasurable through a quick pace, brevity, humor, and frivolity. However, Weldon’s truths are contemporary, often fleeting observations, not eternal verities.

After becoming pregnant out of wedlock, Weldon resigned before she could be fired from the Foreign Office. The London *Daily Mirror*, liking her application letter, hired her to write answers to hire-purchase problems for the readers’ advice pages. Hire-purchase, a new, often misunderstood concept during the 1950s, enabled consumers to procure household items without saving to purchase them outright, but it meant they paid up to 66% above the list price. Weldon ironically expresses the hypocrisy of the scheme in which she participated: “The power of the Press is behind you! . . . The *Mirror*, the People’s Friend! We will protect you from your wrongs and increase our circulation . . .” (Auto 268).

Weldon then enters Showalter’s third “female” phase—self-discovery, a turning inward and a search for identity. Of the five men and Weldon on a newly formed television advertising team, “None of us had the slightest idea what we were doing . . . We struggled on, on our own, re-inventing TV advertising from first principles” (Auto 272). In 1955, the threatening juggernaut of commercial television, with its vulgarity and consumerism, disruption of family, culture, and political life, seemed traitorous to

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13 Corresponds to rent-to-own plans in the United States.
academia and common decency in Britain. But Weldon thrived on creating new culture: “I just loved inventing characters and fitting them into mini-sagas.” Although the advertising team’s soft sell was tasteful, “there was no real risk of them shifting product” (Auto 273). So again Weldon was unemployed. She experienced painfully how, when social values conflict with the aims of capitalism, the latter will prevail.

Weldon returned to Showalter’s second career phase—protest against standards and values. As a Gallup poll market researcher, she polled men on London street corners to ask why they had chosen their ties. To avoid bitter weather and the men’s sexualized responses, Weldon fictionalized choice-of-tie reasons to match fictionalized names and addresses. She was promoted. In this instance, Weldon experienced a material benefit bestowed by the business world, based on lies perceived to better illustrate truth than truth itself. To negotiate capitalism in the production of liberatory fiction, Weldon finds that one may integrate the strategies of capitalism with deconstructive metafiction, adding yet another layer, designed to open the mind, to Marshall McLuhan’s theory that the medium is the message.

With her next writings, Weldon continued in the second career phase—protest and autonomy—but first she joined distinguished fictional protagonists in marrying, out of wrong-headed ideas about commodification, the wrong man. Writing of her poverty-stricken, distanced self in the third person, Weldon recalls, “She would donate her sexual and domestic services in exchange for bed and board for herself and her child” (Auto 286-7). She married Ronald Bateman, a headmaster in his late forties living in the suburb of Acton, with a master’s degree in mathematics from Oxford. Once her material concerns faded, Weldon began to feel that she was wasting her life. Relevant to
Weldon’s career at this point is Carolyn Heilbrun’s citation of what Erik Erikson (considering only men) defines as *moratorium*: “a time when the individual appears . . . to be getting nowhere, accomplishing none of his aims, or altogether unclear as to what those aims might be [but] actually preparing for the task that, all unrecognized, awaits” (*Writing* 49). Heilbrun elaborates, “This condition is marked by a profound sense of vocation, with no idea of what that vocation is, and by a strong sense of inadequacy and deprivation” (53). So Weldon repeated a strategy of negotiation used by her literary foremothers: write at home, for profit, without harm to family. Hiding in “the loo,” Weldon scripted a television play, but the BBC found the emotionally autobiographical subject of “a prostitute living as a married woman in a suburb” unsuitable for 1950s audiences (*Auto* 291). She wrote a novel rejected for its bad dialogue and decided that “writing novels . . . was the home handcraft that got you nowhere,” so she “threw the manuscripts in the dustbin” and gave up writing (*Auto* 292).

Weldon, after leaving the marriage to Bateman, returned to Showalter’s first phase—imitation of prevailing modes of writing—but not to its internalization of prevailing standards for truth and fiction. She became a fashion advertising copywriter. Of her participation in the commodification of language, Weldon remembers, “I could still not afford to have any moral qualms about what I was doing for a living. Necessity ruled.” (*Auto* 322). Weldon has repeatedly cited material concerns as a reason for writing and asserted that morality is what one can afford, but as an established woman of letters, she reasons, “That a living must be earned somehow is no justification for rotting the fabric of society” (*Auto* 340-1). Weldon understands that to convince consumers to buy a product, an advertiser sells them a construct that narrows their view of their own lives.
Weldon’s literary products, however, do not let the reader off easily. Despite their entertaining humor, the stories neither coddle the reader nor provide answers to the questions they pose.

**Offensive Strategy by an Exceptional Woman**

Entering again Showalter’s second phase—declaring independence and claiming autonomy—Weldon progressed toward becoming a professional writer in a narrower sense while she waited at home for the birth of her second child in 1963. She wrote *A Catching Complaint* which, when produced, starred some of the time’s best actors.\(^{14}\)

Having seen a friend and advertising colleague write a successful television play, Weldon awakened from the ideological fiction that women could not write for television because they could not understand technology. In fact, Weldon realized, she had been writing, producing, editing, cutting, dubbing, and adding music to television commercials. She saw that “the only difference between a TV commercial and a TV play, is that the first is short and sells a product and the second is long and sells an idea” (*Auto* 363).

That during the 1980s, Fay Weldon was the exceptional woman of the BBC is widely accepted. At the time, the male-dominated BBC had few women executives, and less than fifteen percent of the creative workforce was women (Hallam 141). Not only was there a dearth of female writers, male writers moved into previously female domains, writing children’s television and soap operas. The “single-play market was becoming increasingly inaccessible to any but top established writers, mainly men” (Bird & Eliot 219). Yet seven of Weldon’s plays were televised, as well as two adaptations, and two serials. At the time of a survey by the Women’s Committee of the Writers’ Guild of

\(^{14}\text{Russell Godgrey, Diana Fairfax, Priscilla Morgan, Hilda Baker, and Tessa Wyatt.}\)
Great Britain, Weldon commented, “The problem is writing things . . . if you can write something they’ll do [produce] it” (Bird & Eliot 219). Unconcerned with the contradiction, Weldon explained that “there is reluctance to spend big [production] budgets on women because of a basic assumption that anything done by a woman . . . is inferior to anything done by a man” (Bird & Eliot 220).

**Splitting Consciousness: Distancing Self from Work**

Despite courageous, disruptive, and possibly manipulative airing of views over forty years of her career, Weldon constructed a private life separate from published fiction. Similar to some literary foremothers, Weldon saw herself as “a struggling woman with an illegitimate baby in the wrong country, at the wrong time” (“Auto da Fay,” *Meet the Author*). It is no surprise that early in her career Weldon did “not think the life or personality of writers to be particularly pertinent to their work” (qtd. in Mitchell 104). In a mid-1980s interview, Weldon summed up a wild, young adult period of her life with “[I] knocked about in neurotic fashion” (qtd. in Haffenden 310).

Weldon’s fictionalizing of her personal life is amply demonstrated by such references as the *Current Biography Workbook* and the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, which differ on the dates of significant events. When confronted by interviewer Valerie Grove about guarding family privacy with lies about biographical facts, Weldon replied, “You mean I tell lies? [Life is] fiction too”. But this negotiation between private and public life has positively affected Weldon’s career in the quick march that is the current culture industry. Her inconsistencies create conflict and suspense. Although she may truly “see no virtue in consistency,” her inconsistencies in interviews and as a result of advancing stages of life create public and media interest (qtd. in Rountree 97). In *Auto da Fay: A Memoir*
Weldon not only opened her life—personal and professional—to public scrutiny, but in the latter insisted that a writer’s life and fiction are inseparable.

*Concealing and Revealing Sexuality*

Reviewer Richard Eder calls the title of Weldon’s memoir, *Auto da Fay*, “a virtuoso triple pun on inquisitorial self-punishment.” In it, she skewers herself by recounting events beginning in 1956 that involve too much alcohol, and random, unconsidered sexual activity. In third person, using the surname of the father of her first baby to distance her earlier, unacceptable self, she observes, “Davies wasn’t facing up to her responsibilities; she . . . let her mother baby-sit all day and then all night as well. Davies would go to pubs, parties, and goodness knows what. Davies was man-crazy” (*Auto* 284). She entirely repudiates the self who was the wife of Ronald Bateman: “Fay Bateman is more than the current ‘I’ can bear” (*Auto* 283). In a sexless marriage with a man whom she discovered to be a voyeur, she helped her friend Ellen, who was a junior executive at an advertising agency, entertain traveling executives. She, Ellen, and the executives engaged in dangerous sexual activity. Weldon points out that although this behavior was not, strictly speaking, prostitution, it was an exchange of sexual activity in return for smooth business dealings, and, like her marriage to Bateman, commodification of a woman as a form of exchange. For such admissions, reviewers termed her tone in *Auto da Fay* “arch,” “detached,” and even “numb.”

Weldon ends her memoir just as she enters the third—self-discovery—phase of her career at age 35: “What I do from now on, all that early stuff digested and out of the way, is write, and let living take a minor role” (*Auto* 366). After this point in her
increasingly public life, she keeps “all that early stuff” out of the way, for even during the increasingly tolerant late twentieth century, some of it did not befit the proper woman writer. This defensive strategy protected family members from unwanted publicity and Weldon’s image within the culture industry, resulting in continued marketability as she moved into the fourth career phase—woman of letters and public intellectual. Weldon also protected family members from the often autobiographical content of her writing by requesting that they refrain from reading it. While this strategy may offer little actual protection, it frees Weldon of responsibility for their reactions. Nearly a half-century later, the early nonfiction material has become highly marketable in a culture industry made increasingly tolerant in part through its own voracious consumption.

For years Weldon proclaimed “that all fiction springs quite free of the author” (Hoggard). But with the publication of Mantrapped (2004), she reversed herself to observe that “fiction alone is not enough” (“Mantrapped,” Meet the Author). In this effort, instead of prescribing, Weldon weakly postscripts popular culture. Responding to reality television or “real life lived out in a fictional context,” she interweaves her life through the fiction (Mantrapped 20). With commentaries on the relationships among Weldon’s life, composition processes, resulting fiction, and the fiction’s reflexive effect on her life, Mantrapped interweaves a novel about Tricia and Peter who accidentally exchange souls. True to Weldon’s penchant for popular culture, the commentaries read like confessional autobiography, complete with name-dropping. They do provide material of critical and historical interest. But the novel, confusing enough with Tricia inhabiting Peter’s body and vice versa, suffers from the interruptions.
High Productivity

Although in Auto da Fay Weldon decries her complicity in “rotting the fabric of society” (341), she remains open about employing narrative strategies derived from the commodification of language in order to write literature. Further, she satirizes and exploits the culture industry. This situation translates into an idiosyncratic marketing philosophy. About her failure to produce a novel as writer-in-residence at The Savoy Hotel, Weldon commented, “In the past, I have sent characters to Claridge’s to sort their lives out. Now, I dare say, I will send them to The Savoy: it would seem invidious not to” (qtd. in Brynes). Weldon pitches her topics differently to different audiences because in advertising she had “the purchaser’s socioeconomic profile before [her] on the desk” (qtd. in Handschuh). Later, television production required her to write “on levels” so that productions appealed to the widest audience possible, “sophisticated and simple alike” (8 Mar. 2003). In 2003, Weldon received “much bitchy criticism” when she contracted with the Italian jewelry firm of Bulgari to write a novel commemorating the opening of their Sloane Street store in London (Brynes). Positioning herself as a meta-consumer, Weldon states, “I write the novel I want to read, because no one else has written it” (qtd. in Handschuh).

In part, Weldon has allowed marketability to determine her literary production. Her first novel, The Fat Woman’s Joke, was originally published in the United States as . . . and the wife ran away; Little Sisters was published as Words of Advice; Affliction

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15 The Bulgari Connection and its conditions of reception will be explored in Chapter 3.
as *Trouble*; and *Big Women* as *Big Girls Don’t Cry*. In a composition process unlike her usual dash to print, Weldon wrote *Splitting* in intervals over two years. She finished a version in which the protagonist “existed as the sum of her troubles . . . leaving her almost non-existent and invisible” (19 Aug. 1998). A later version left the protagonist “her true self, busy and sensible and un-neurotic . . . though . . . rather boring” (19 Aug. 1998). In England, Flamingo published the non-existent, invisible version; in the United States, Atlantic Monthly Press preferred and published the busy, sensible, boring version. About this situation Weldon commented: “[T]he UK version is the right one and Version B was a revision too far, but if you write a novel called Spitting [sic] it is all too like to split itself . . .” (19 Aug. 1998). This comment disingenuously omits the likelihood that each version was better marketable to its particular consumer population. Weldon frequently eschews artistic purity in favor of financial acumen.

*The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983), her best known novel in the United States, was published in its U.S. Ballantine edition without Chapter 29 of the British Hodder & Stoughton edition. In this chapter the protagonist joins and then rejects a separatist-feminist commune. Weldon says that in the United States the chapter was “censored . . . for fear of annoying the readers and losing sales . . .” (11 Jan. 2001). *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* has been adapted for the screen twice: by Ted Whitehead as a serial for BBC television (1986), and by Jonathan Bret, Barry Strugatz, and Mark Burns as an Orion Pictures feature film (1989). Although Whitehead’s version won a British Academy of Film and Television Arts for best drama series, it changed the novel through an increased focus on the protagonist’s wayward husband and his lover. Weldon
praises Whitehead’s version for working “extremely well” (qtd. in Kumar). The feature film reduces the novel to a “formula Hollywood patriarchal vehicle” according to film critic Pamela Katz. Although Weldon agrees, her comment that “it does a writer no harm at all to have Roseanne and Meryl Streep in their films . . .” reveals her attention to marketability (qtd. in Kumar).

**Forming Literature from Personal Experience—Alternate Paths**

*There was so much unsaid in the world  
I could go on saying it for ever.*  
—Fay Weldon

Like several earlier women writers, Weldon’s career as a novelist was rooted partially in writing plays. With publication of *The Fat Woman’s Joke* in 1967, Weldon entered Showalter’s third career phase—self-discovery. This was accomplished through the unorthodoxy of fleshing television play scripts into novels; idiosyncratic feminist content; and a perfunctory style attributed to three factors: a reflexive critique of her psychoanalytic orality, the editorial demands of copywriting, and the interruptions of small children. As a result of generic and financial limitations on script writing, Weldon learned to propel the action with every line so that meaning emerged from the characters’ words and actions (8 Mar. 2003). In *Letters to Alice*, Weldon praises Jane Austen’s powerful setting of scenes: “The mental presence of an actual audience is reason for the peculiarly dramatic scene-setting. She knows how to end a scene, an episode, a chapter, before beginning the next . . .” (62). This observation applies to Weldon herself, for she practiced on radio and television audiences, her success quickly measured by ratings. To wrest artistic control from the broadcast industry, Weldon revised television plays into

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16 The adaptation of *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* will be discussed further in Chapter 3.
her early novels, for instance, *The Fat Woman’s Joke* and *The Heart of the Country*, revised into a novel because it “was really about one of the minor characters.” In the novel version, she replaced all the material that the BBC had cut from the screenplay. Then she “discovered the pleasure of making comments outside the action . . . and became a novelist” (8 Mar. 2003).

In both literary production and public statements, Weldon has maintained an uneasy dialog with the Women’s Movement. Her direct comments on feminism exemplify her resistance to hegemony and the near impossibility of defining her position. When asked in a 1995 interview how the Women’s Movement influenced her as a writer, she eschewed modesty to reply, “I like to think I influenced it! I started writing in England at the same time as the women’s movement there got going, so we were more or less contemporary phenomena.” She adds, “And anyway, writing about women will make you look at women in a feminist way” (qtd. in Kumar). This comment typifies Weldon’s occasional disingenuousness: authors of novels, conduct books, and sermons aimed at women have not necessarily seen them in a feminist way. In 1997, her comments were more straightforward: “[W]hat brought about feminism is what brought about me” (qtd. in Rountree 103). Asserting that her stories are born out of personal indignation rather than feminist theory, Weldon at once embraces and distances feminism. For Weldon, the personal is political and writing is a political act. But she says also, “I was never writing [feminist] propaganda . . . just portraits and parables of the world I saw around me . . .” (18 Jun. 2002). She possesses a particular talent for perceiving the world outside any particular orthodoxy.
Weldon has had a complex relationship with psychology and psychiatry, which she denigrates as “the therapy industry” (Mantrapped 192). However, she credits psychoanalysis with helping to catalyze her writing career. As a condition of marriage to Ron Weldon, Weldon agreed to psychoanalysis, which lasted eight years. In analysis Weldon distanced and accessed thoughts and feelings by “put[ting] them into the heads of fictional characters, and consider[ing] them” (Mantrapped 189). Writing of herself in third person, Weldon observes, “She has hardly time to get one sentence out before another takes over. Psychoanalysis . . . enables her, as she explains herself non-stop . . . to separate thought out from feeling, and turn both into coherent narrative. She learns the value of finishing her sentences and composing them with grace” (Auto 353).

However Weldon denigrates the workings of capitalism, she also credits its lessons in reader response. She worked in advertising agencies where typographers taught her that readers resist dense passages of print. Copywriting colleagues also tutored her: Elizabeth Smart, who wrote By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept (1945) taught her “the value of exactitude” (Mantrapped 29). Maurice Smelt, “a grammarian, a perfectionist gave me the value of precision: he rejected nearly everything I wrote until in the end I understood why it would not do” (Auto 323). “‘Reading and noting’ tests, to which our ads were regularly subjected—which words people remembered, which they ignored, the overall [impression] left by the text—confirmed what I was taught. So I practiced it” (8 Mar. 2003). Undoubtedly, the capitalistic practice works. When her book sales decreased, Weldon’s agent reminded her, “You write consistent product, we sell” (Mantrapped 211).

Despite training in advertising, Weldon has attributed her epigrammatic prose
style to the interruptions of small children. As noted in Chapter 1, Weldon wrote in stolen moments, well aware from her own upbringing that children resent parental absorption outside themselves. In *Mantrapped*, she echoes Charlotte Smith’s complaints about the forced pace: “And so through rain, hail, love, disappointment, psychoanalysis, notoriety, disgrace, divorce and pregnancies, rehearsals, lost socks, cooking, laundry and plastic bags, I somehow kept the writing coming. Faster, faster, more, more” (154). In fact, Weldon admits that her methods of composition approach automatic writing: “I write first and think later and make things up as I go along . . .” (9 Mar. 2001). This may be somewhat inaccurate even considering her prolific output. During a 1989 interview, critic Olga Kenyon observed, “You are much more planned and deliberate than you sometimes admit” and segued into a question about unproductive days (*Women Writers*, 207). Weldon answered only the follow-up question, neither affirming nor denying Kenyon’s observation; she seems to prefer a public image as a dasher-off of fiction.

Weldon received her only direct training as a novelist in 1968, when poet and critic Louis Simpson became her neighbor in London. To *The Fat Woman’s Joke* Simpson reacted, “But this is not a proper novel! . . . Novels have inner form . . . shape, purpose, profundity. This is just and then, and then, and then, as if a child were writing it. Worse, it is written in the present tense . . .” (*Mantrapped* 82-3). At this unqualified criticism, Weldon portrays herself as an interloper into literature. Her family needed income, and she needed to expand her intellectual life. She adapted a literary form to her needs, and the novel was selling. Still, she says she experienced her published effort as inadequate and confesses her reaction was due to more than Simpson’s criticism. The culture industry had its effect: according to Weldon, Granada Television produced the
original script because the director desired her sexually; MacGibbon and Kee published the novel because they planned to amalgamate with Granada; and an art critic reviewed the novel enthusiastically because, as a friend of Ron Weldon, he wanted to purchase antiques at a good price (Mantrapped 84).

About Weldon’s second novel, Down Among the Women (1971), Simpson asked, “So what you are doing in these novels is engaging in alienation techniques?” Weldon says she did not know or ask the meaning of his term, but she did heed his advice about novelistic shape and inner form, physical descriptions of characters, recapping the characters, and recognition of the inevitable as it forms on the page. She did not heed Simpson’s strictures to write in past tense and introduce characters slowly. Neither did she refrain from writing “egregious, pathetic” novels of domestic life (Mantrapped 93). She has repeatedly asserted that women’s lives are as interesting and significant as men’s, that women, not men, maintain society through the activities of bearing and raising children, feeding, clothing, cleaning, and generally enabling humanity as a whole.

Offensive Novel Strategies

Me and my readers are in this together.
—Fay Weldon

Heather Dubrow articulates in general critical terms Simpson’s objections to Weldon’s novels: genre is so engrained in critical assessment that it becomes an institution. As a result:

It is often possible to challenge such institutions, sometimes to overthrow them, but it is virtually impossible simply to exclude them from our lives. . . [W]hen an author chooses to write in a given genre, he is not merely
responding to the achievements and the pronouncements of others; he himself is issuing certain statements about his art and often about art in general. (10)

Certainly Weldon issues statements about the novel form. One is a refusal to construct novels as received truth. Using the novel satirically, Weldon writes metafiction with authorial intrusions, reminding readers often that a story of lies only illustrates truth. “There is the world as it is and there is the world as we would like it to be. I am trying to make the world as I would like it to be . . . and there’s a gulf in between,” she asserts (qtd. in Kumar). However, her fiction functions within that gulf. She suggests that marginalized people have more power than they realize to affect and construct culture. They can access that power if they perceive how mass culture imposes social roles and imposed social roles act against them consciously to create a culture that broadens the mind: “In advertising I was intensely conscious of the way we sold a notion or normality. I want to take that process apart” (qtd. in Kenyon, Women Writers 195).

Weldon’s novels seem overtly didactic, even strident or preachy, harkening back to conduct books. Critic Jenny Newman terms them “survival manuals” (188) for women. But readers cannot pin down any overt moral to her stories. Weldon’s sort of didacticism entertains while conveying observations about the realities of life. But its sub-textual lesson is, “Wake up! Observe without letting ideologies, especially commodified ones, determine or deny your perceptions.” Through dark, satiric comedy that provides pleasure and distance, Weldon’s novels point rudely outside the text: “Jokes serve as punctuation, and alienation in the Brechtian sense. You have to come out of the alternative world offered by the artist and consider your own, even as you laugh”
(22 Nov. 2000). Weldon opens issues for reader consideration by creating several characters with wildly differing ideas but presenting each character’s ideas as equally valid. Critic Tess Cosslett finds Weldon’s satiric novels “essentially amoral, bent on provocation from all directions” (96). Although the novels present characters’ situations as contingent, they have a moral overlay: Weldon purposely provokes readers to reflect on the causes and effects of right and wrong. For this, Weldon credits her mother, “an intellectually rigorous person” who put everything into “some moral context, though not a conventional one” (qtd. in Kenyon, Women Writers 204).

The pleasures of reading Weldon’s novels are several: fast pace, humor, wild coincidences, recognizable characters with common flaws. And readers expend little effort suspending disbelief or maintaining resistance to subjection by the text. Weldon refuses to write possessive texts; her metafictional narrative strategies and authorial comments remind readers that they are reading a story of lies that reflects truth. Nor does Weldon write uplifting, absorbing tales of a sympathetic protagonist liberating herself from whatever oppression has plagued her. Weldon’s protagonists usually return to stasis once a crisis has passed, but the novels’ endings seem neither entirely happy nor final.

Weldon further resists traditional conventions of the novel by mixing genres, using drama, in the general sense of story, presented in various modes—fairy tale, folk tale, magic realism, horror story, science fiction, detective mystery—all to open readers to new ways of thought. At the same time, instead of refusing the co-opting functions of capitalism, she employs them against it. Weldon operates to publish deconstructive novels, the profits from which support her and her family. She attempts to awaken readers to the machinations of male-dominated mass culture, and in her later work to the
ergonarchy, her term for the forces of modern mass culture that administer, compartmentalize, and diminish human life, including the culture industry characterized by Horkheimer and Adorno.

Conclusion

Weldon spent her apprentice years in print advertising and then in television and radio, where economic necessity assured that she would imitate prevailing conventions, artistic standards, and ideologies of mass culture—the first phase of Showalter’s career analysis. In her second career phase, Weldon declared her independence and claimed autonomy by writing novels to liberate her works from the artistic controls of broadcasting. She transformed the prevailing conventions of advertising and scripting by applying an epigrammatic style, direct addresses to readers, short sentences, and short, widely spaced paragraphs to the novel form. Then Weldon initiated her third career phase, a search for self-defined individuality, through continued unconventional explorations of the novel and other forms. In her fourth, and current, career phase as public intellectual, she continues to construct herself against the traditional type of the artist. She boasts of earning a prosperous living by writing, not of suffering for her art. Instead of hiding away in a garret, she appears regularly in mass media, looking as attractive as possible to enhance sales and prompt further appearances. She is extroverted, cheerful, and energetic. Instead of world-weary, she portrays herself moving through life and literature as a naïve picara.

Both in Auto da Fay and Mantrapped she constructs herself as a nearly accidental novelist. Although she takes the duties of her work seriously, her prolific, uneven output
demonstrates that she does not take any single work, or herself, overly seriously. The artist as a tortured soul is a role Weldon denies; she constructs herself as an eternal, happy worker: “See me as Sisyphus, but having a good time” (qtd. in Newman 188).

Lack of self-consciousness about uneven performance and lack of neurotic perfectionism enable Weldon to move continuously forward. Before the publication of *Auto da Fay*, she was asked about her next book. Calling it an autobiography, she commented, “And it’s not even as if ongoing life goes on hold” (qtd. in Handschuh).

Weldon’s novels emerge from the interplay of market forces (earning a living), authorial control (also subject to market forces), and the pleasure of writing the novels she wishes to read. The popularity of her fiction, onscreen and in print, established Weldon during the 1980s as a public figure, a British woman of letters and public intellectual. As such, she has insisted on saying the unsaid, especially to elevate domestic concerns. She has also embraced and encouraged rage and humor to energize readers to liberate themselves from ideological fictions imposed by mass culture.

Weldon has revised the role of the woman of letters by using the materials of the popular culture—melodrama, science fiction, ghost tales, romance. These she combines with certain constructs, theorized by high culture but common in contemporary intellectual discourse, to instance, mirror-stage theory, and Foucauldian alternative history, and female identity constructed by the male gaze. In so doing, Weldon posits alterations to mass culture and helps popularize the ideas. Weldon fulfills the requirement of social critic bell hooks that feminists concern themselves with literacy: hooks has faulted theorists and academicians for making arguments meant to be

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17 This point, significant in placing Weldon’s oeuvre, will be addressed more fully in Chapter 3.
democratic and empowering while using language only they can decipher (105).

Feminist Maia Ettinger insists that “communities engaged in struggles for liberation need access to [critical] theory . . . [because it often has] direct bearing on people’s lives” (155). Weldon makes postmodern, feminist theories available in recognizable genres, in brief bursts, to those whose lives do not allow meditative reading of deeply engaging novels and the unpacking of dense prose. Through Weldon’s stories, readers can translate theory from fiction to their real lives.

Weldon presents flexible pieces of a puzzle the reader must piece together; she baffles to incite thinking and consideration. I believe that the whole of her oeuvre has a complex, though important, inferential, feminist moral center. Her protagonists’ problems arise from their ignorance of their own character and needs, their own failure to be healthily selfish, that is, to love themselves as well as they do others. In her works “women must, to begin with, see themselves and all women as human beings, and as guardians of their own integrity and fate” (Barreca, “It’s the End” 179). To save themselves from oppression, women must be willing to act—often without the benefit of knowledge or foresight, in a world fraught with happenstance—in what they perceive to be their own best interest. Women free themselves from oppression when they decline to act with binary concepts of right and wrong imposed by mass culture. They can tap into the energy engendered by hate, resentment, and anger to fuel acts beneficial to themselves. Women resist oppression when they do not privilege loving men over loving their sisters and friends, and they must stop loving men as they exist in their imaginations—phantoms in whose image their husbands stand (The Cloning of Joanna May 19). Women rightly make up life as they go along, based on the concept of
situational morality, validating the multiplicity of experience—and they should do so with energy and enjoyment (Barreca, “It’s the End” 181). The characters in Weldon’s novels question “the right of any society to govern; indeed, [question] the very idea of society itself (Barreca, “It’s the End” 176). And women should remain skeptical of all sources of knowledge; whether it is knowledge proselytized by cultural institutions or passed on by other women. At the same time, women should listen carefully to the stories of their sisters, mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and nieces as possible sources of wisdom, support, and strength. Women who consciously recount and seek to understand their life experiences can gain subjectivity; in Weldonspeak: “I tell my story; therefore I am—until I’m not.”

Such contradictory language and the strategy behind it characterize the difficulties faced by reviewers and critics. In Chapter 3, I will explore the critical constructions of Weldon’s career and works.
Chapter 3: Critical Constructions of Fay Weldon As Woman Writer

Introduction

The passage which follows, from The Cloning of Joanna May (1989), illustrates in part why Fay Weldon’s novels resist criticism. In Joanna May, Weldon utilizes the popular forms and motifs of suspense, psychological science fiction, twinning, and the tarot. More seriously, Weldon explores themes of identity formation, mirror-stage theory, nature versus nurture, the commodification of women, human cloning, and the nuclear power industry. In this passage, Joanna May waxes philosophical, or perhaps religious, on the human ego, forgiveness and compassion; she achieves a measure of tranquility. But after a double-spaced break in text, at the very end of the chapter, Weldon intrudes sharply to disturb Joanna’s, and the reader’s, tranquility:

It is my experience that a quiet mind is gained only by forgiveness:
when you cease to see the other as enemy, as merely yourself in
another guise, see the “you” as perceived by the other, forget the
notion of “I”—I shiver, I suffer, I bleed, I hate, my head will burst
with my resentments; you whom I hate for not acknowledging this
I—then peace descends. Our lives are our own again.

Until the next storm bursts. (92)

A trio of Weldon’s comments on the novel Puffball (1980) further illustrates the difficulties of critically constructing Weldon’s novels. In a 1995 interview, Weldon
articulates her thesis in *Puffball*: babies, not parents, are the major players in the drama of pregnancy: “[b]abies just exist . . . with all their passions and emotions” (qtd. in Kumar). But in 2002, Weldon writes that *Puffball* “was always just about Liffey [the pregnant protagonist], the witch, and the power and lyricism of landscape in all its forms” (18 Sep. 2002). Elsewhere, Weldon describes *Puffball* as a purposeful refutation of radical feminism’s espousal of androgyny.

Weldon describes early reactions to her work in the third person: “What she says is disconcerting to others. Friends leave rooms when she comes into them. She is by implication suggesting a revolution . . . [but she] is not trying to change, just to describe” (*Mantrapped* 161). But here Weldon’s disingenuousness is showing again; she well understands that language has a formative function and that most people would rather have their culturally correct preconceptions confirmed than exploded by truth. Too, she prevaricates, for she tells interviewers that “fiction does make minute alterations in people’s lives” and that “I want to lead people to consider and explore new ideas” (qtd. in Haffenden 315 & Kenyon, “Radicalizing” 110). Weldon is conscious of writing literature with the intent to reform; for instance, to let women know how beastly men can be, “so they can do what they want about it” (qtd. in Haffenden 308). Elsewhere, Weldon specifically contradicts Dale Carnegie: “You have to be prepared to lose friends if you mean to influence people” (qtd. in Handschuh).

In this chapter, I will evaluate the critical work on Weldon and her oeuvre, emphasizing how Weldon has been constructed by her readers, reviewers, and critics. I contend that feminist critics construct Weldon positively, with only a few reservations.  

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18 Quotations from the Fay Weldon Discussion Group online are documented parenthetically by the date of posting. The quotations are reproduced as posted. <http://redmond.com/weldon/discuss.html>.
for she is their sister. Their critiques tend to be descriptive or partisan rather than argumentative discourse. Some male reviewers and critics manifest chauvinist attitudes, overtly or covertly. For the former group, Weldon serves as one of the several slightly flawed contemporary literary heroines; to the latter, a less than intellectually focused lady novelist, but a writer just serious enough that they consider her work. Like the quality of Weldon’s literary production, her critical construction is also uneven. Further, I contend that although critics accurately construct Weldon as an equivocal feminist, postmodern novelist, at once exploiting and subverting the culture industry, several privilege her construction as an anachronistic, displaced sage and wild woman applying her wisdom and vigor within an oppressive urban mass culture. Although Weldon participates in all levels of postmodern cultural life, she preserves a space out of which she restores the ancient mode of women’s oral culture.

Since wise women advise especially the young, I begin the chapter with a brief discussion of how Weldon’s works, combined with her public persona, affect her readers. Then, an analysis of selected reviews reveals the continuing conflation of the woman writer’s personal life with her literary production, as discussed in Chapter 1. This chapter continues with an attempt to define the difficulties of critically evaluating Weldon’s literary production. I posit that her productions, prolific and anticipatory, have negatively affected her position as a woman of letters according to the standards of high culture. Virginia Woolf, for example, has been censured by critics for privileging the aesthetic; Weldon for not producing aesthetically pleasing works of art according to modernist principles. This, among other things, has kept Weldon in a somewhat marginalized literary position, as were her predecessors for different and various reasons. Next,
partially because of British television’s reputation for excellence and Weldon’s extensive production of drama, the chapter briefly treats her place in screen literature. Finally, I attempt to encapsulate the evaluation of Weldon’s novels in terms of feminist, non-feminist, and humor criticism.

The critical material considered in this chapter derives from sources appropriate to evaluation of a writer whose aim it is to deconstruct the boundaries among mass, high, and popular cultures: the online Fay Weldon Discussion Group, online reviews, and critical articles and books, both online and hard copy, limited to hard copy publications available in the United States.

**Readerly Constructions**

*She seems to get to the gore and not throw away the bliss.*
—Ann Privateer, reader

Weldon values “the communality of women’s interests, and the sharing of the latest eyeshadow” (Dickinson). She participates on the electronic Fay Weldon Discussion List. She defamiliarizes and deormalizes the novel with such conversational lines as this one from *The Shrapnel Academy* (1986): “Reader, I know it isn’t easy. But if I can write it, you can read it” (172). With such actions, Weldon deconstructs the modernist barrier between writer and reader. For Weldon and her works about women’s lives, sisterhood is indeed powerful.

Of course readers’ informal “critiques” praise her literary work; those who dislike it can simply stop reading. They do not post to the Fay Weldon Discussion Group. In some places, Weldon’s works are considered highly subversive; a Belgian acquaintance of Weldon’s hides in the bathroom to read novels forbidden by her husband. The tenor of
readerly responses can partly evaluate the efficacy of Weldon’s narrative strategies, a forty-year attempt to recount authentic female experience in order to liberate readers from the reenactment of ideological commodifications.

As noted in Chapter 2, Weldon’s copious works have been translated into twenty-four languages; her audience is global. Posts from the Discussion Group originate not only in Britain, the United States, and Australia, but also in France, Spain, Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, Russia, and India. Also noted in Chapter 2, naïve students of literature look to the Discussion Group for interpretive assistance. But literary scholars offer their expertise; for example, Lana Faulks, who has authored a Twayne’s English Authors evaluation of Weldon’s oeuvre. Literary questions aside, posts to the Discussion Group reveal Weldon’s popularity indirectly, through readers’ frustration at the unavailability of her books. One of many such posts reads, “I began chasing your old ones [out-of-print novels] in second hand shops. In Paris, with some small success, and in London, where I found five . . .” (23 Jul. 2005).

Women post to the Discussion Group to articulate what Weldon’s work has meant within their experience of life. One comment, “Fay’s asides are simply wonderful,” demonstrates both the sense of kinship that Weldon inspires and an appreciation for her unconventional narrative strategies. A French primary school teacher writes that Weldon’s treatment of divorce and child custody has supported her during separation from her partner and issuance of a custody judgment decreeing that she could see her son only every other week: “I knew by then I would need you throughout my life.” She recalls thinking, “[Weldon] never changes subject; it’s always about women going through, going on . . . . [Y]ou were always «ni tout à fait la même, ni tout à fait une
autre» (23 Jul. 2005). A thirty-six-year-old woman from Perth, Australia, read and reread *The Hearts and Lives of Men* after picking it up in a charity shop. She attests to Weldon’s rhetorical effect: “I have been in a strangely difficult relationship for a long-time and have felt utterly lost to myself. Reading this novel jolted me, somehow reminded me of myself and gave me a courage that has lately, inexplicably, deserted me.” She proposes that Weldon’s novels heal by stimulating women’s imaginations (10 Oct. 2005).

In interviews and public statements, Weldon often comments on the social changes she has observed in the relations between men and women since the 1950s and 1960s. Currently she regards her early feminist novels as social history: “I sometimes think anything I wrote before 1985 should be restricted reading for anyone under 35—in case it gives them a false perspective on life today” (18 Jun. 2002). But readers do not agree. One post declares that *Praxis* (1978) is “entirely relevant today. The way Praxis modified her behavior to suit each man she was with— The way women in general subordinate themselves willingly to please outside forces” (27 Aug. 2002). A thirty-year-old woman writes that she has been reading Weldon’s novels since she was sixteen or seventeen:

> Fay you have been my friend, my sister and my mum all from the pages of your books . . . . Every time I re-read your books . . . there is something new that I can relate to as I grow older and gain more of lifes experiences. Wether it’s to do with being a mother . . . or to do with the different person you are in connection with your name, be it my birth name or taking my step-father’s name then going back to my birth name and then a married
name . . . all those name changes seem like different chapters in my book, different version of me” (28 Mar. 2005).

This post affirms Weldon’s successful illustration of postmodern theoretical constructs: the phallogocentric power of names and naming in a male-dominated society, storytelling’s formative function in identity construction, multiple and serial identities, and standpoint theory.

Despite Weldon’s sometime condemnation of the therapy industry, psychological theory informs her characters’ stories. This too affects Weldon’s readers. One who performs an undisclosed therapeutic role comments on the theme of Splitting (1995). In both versions of this novel (explained in Chapter 2), Lady Angelica Rice suffers multiple personality disorder brought to crisis by imminent divorce. An advocate of multiple identities, Weldon dramatizes in dark comedy how Angelica’s “other” identities wage pink-collar guerilla warfare against the male-dominated institutions of mass culture, in order to preserve Angelica and restore her relative well-being. Knowledgeable on this subject, Weldon’s reader articulates changing a social perspective on the human psyche:

The splitting or fragmenting of identity . . . has, generally, been viewed as a ‘failure’ of function . . . and the pervasive and tacit goal of treatment was to patch the identity back together again with sticky tape (medications) and bits of string (counseling designed to return her to the life her psyche was revolting against in the first place). As I worked with women who were undergoing this type of crisis, and having experienced it myself, I began to see it differently. If the vessel shatters, it is to release the creative energy within so that it can create a new form. The cycle of birth,
death, rebirth (another theme . . . of Fay’s books) is Life ongoing. (2 Apr. 2001)

The reader continues about this process: the psyche shatters in response to loss of identity or disillusionment and brings forth shadows to be recognized, accepted, and reconstellated. Thereafter on the Discussion Group, a dialog ensues between readers on whether human beings possess a central core, nature, or essence, Weldon’s theme in, among other novels, *The Cloning of Joanna May* and *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*.

For these readers and others, Weldon does not exist just as a favorite author. Even though readers may know her only through the medium of her texts, the texts actually bridge the relationship. Weldon exists “down among the women.” Her willingness to expose the vulnerabilities in women’s lives evokes for her readers the relief of gaining a trusted friend and confidante. Expressing their experience of life challenges most women, and this need segues into women’s self-writing, that is, autobiography, in which women writers have struggled be a friend to themselves while formulating authentic portrayals of the essence of their lives.

*Construction of a Woman Writer’s Life*

In *Writing a Woman’s Life* (1988), Carolyn Heilbrun defends the confessional for women’s autobiography, reasoning that other types seem “self-protective, and too readily conforming to the male model of distance and apparent disinterest” (68). Critic Elspeth Graham believes that “[i]ssues of self-writing are shown to be tied up quite directly with issues of social class or rank, with groups and group cultures as well as individual motivations and personalities” (212). In 2002, in her late sixties, Weldon published a confessional autobiography, *Auto da Fay*: *A Memoir*. The memoir ends climactically in
1963, when she is thirty years old and laboring with two births, that of her son and of her first successfully produced television script. The memoir typifies Weldon’s fiction and contrariness: she ends it with a beginning. But, typical of Weldon’s writing, the memoir is more complicated than that because she occasionally forays beyond 1963, exploring the effects of her distant past on her recent past.

Reviewer Richard Eder of the New York Times also complicates perceptions of Auto da Fay, criticizing it as too “austere and bracing” for confession. In the mid-twentieth century, Weldon’s austere, bracing tone might have been well received for its internalization of prevailing literary conventions, artistic standards, and social ideologies, that is, because it conforms to the male model of distance and apparent disinterest. But in 2003, Eder seems to require of Weldon’s memoir warmth, evocativeness, and nostalgia, regardless of how the recounted events inform the memoirist’s affect. Additionally, reviewer Claudia FitzHerbert finds the Weldon of Mantrapped (2002, the novel interwoven with a memoir-writer’s diary) an “author who can’t, or won’t commit” to her own story and so should leave it “to some more dependable official biographer.” Such receptions of autobiography reveal how mass culture continues to limit women’s construction of their lives and work.

In some ways, other reviewers find fewer faults with Weldon’s memoirs. Reviewing Auto da Fay, Alex Clark of The Guardian asserts that in spite of Weldon’s tone of “arch, amused detachment . . . anecdotalis[ing] her own life into a series of vignettes so throwaway that they brook all sentiment and resemble nothing more than fiction . . . dictated, in high spirits, after dinner,” the reader still suffers terror at certain episodes and at the lingering effect on Weldon of her father’s unexplained absence. In an
even softer review, Jonathan Yardley of *The Washington Post* sees in the tone of *Auto da Fay* the following: fondness; regret; occasional, brief malice and astonishment; stoic acceptance; humor; and occasional bursts of anger—but, to Weldon’s credit, no bitterness.

Yet one of Yardley’s statements reveals how mass culture oppressively constructs women writers. In the penultimate paragraph he writes, “In 1963, two years after [Fay and Ron’s] marriage, she wrote a play for television . . . and thus began the writing career that . . . surely is the lasting evidence of what her marriage gave her.” Aside from the *post hoc* fallacy, this statement ignores Weldon’s stated conditions of production, including Ron’s disapproval and sabotage, and her financial and domestic contributions. In short, Yardley reinscribes the marriage plot onto Weldon and her literary production.

Similarly, Eder critiques Weldon’s priorities: he notes that the memoir ends with mailing her first successful script, but “[o]nly secondarily is she on her way to the hospital, giving birth three hours later.” That Weldon was capitalizing on her time while waiting at home for labor to begin, that the doctor ordered her immediately to the hospital to induce labor because the baby was dangerously beyond forty weeks gestation—these recounted facts Elder ignores. Instead, the juxtaposition of his two observations implies that Weldon is somehow mistaken; she should pay full attention to reproducing, not to producing the literature that provides her both intellectual work and material support. For *Mantrapped*, FitzHerbert also criticizes Weldon in terms of motherhood. In short, Weldon should exist foremost as the physicality of her womanhood. Weldon, however, views her script as another kind of birth: “I know it has an existence outside myself: I simply deliver it, as a midwife delivers a baby” (*Auto* 365). FitzHerbert casts the novel’s characters Peter and
Trisha as children who suffer from Weldon’s lack of full attention and her uncertainty—uncertainty being a deficiency in a positivistic mass culture.

Moreover, Eder criticizes Weldon for writing a memoir “not to evoke the past but to get rid of it” and for “the refusal to engage herself even with herself.” Eder seems oblivious to Weldon’s experience of life, to what it means for a woman of Weldon’s age and status to reveal facts and actions she has troubled to conceal, or muddy, for over forty years. More specifically, Eder shows no awareness of the cultural conditions in which women lived during the 1950s and 1960s. Of course Weldon desires to distance herself from a socially unacceptable, emotionally ignorant past self through revelation and confession: now in her eighth decade, Weldon may want to record certain events in her own terms. Eder questions whether readers will engage with the austere, bracing memoir, terming it *autopathography*, extending the word *pathography* that Joyce Carol Oates coined to describe reductive biographies. Stylistically, Weldon’s works tend to the reductive, and historically, Weldon provides revelatory texts for readers who suffered, or suffer, under similar ideologies of womanhood, sexuality, and reproduction. For Weldon to reveal herself in *Auto da Fay* as the failed, shameful “lost girl” of a love affair and illegitimate baby, a perverse marriage of convenience, and the next thing to prostitution not only takes courage but also extends courage to her readers in ways attested to by the readers of her novels.

With revelations of personal life in *Auto da Fay* and *Mantrapped*, Weldon experienced what in the administered life is termed “a growth opportunity.” She clarified how events in her life shaped her fiction after long affirming the total separation of an author’s life and works. Weldon has stretched not only by sharing her personal growth,
but also by constructing herself as a woman writer who has embraced the woman of letters phase of her career.

**Difficulties of Critical Construction of the New Woman of Letters**

Weldon stretches the constructs “woman of letters” and “public intellectual” by combining the theories of high culture with the genres of popular culture to help women de-encode their perceptions from those encouraged and imposed by mass culture. Certainly Weldon’s easily-read works refer women to their real lives in the service of consciousness raising and liberation. But, her postmodern literary production and continually-revised public role pose difficulties for those accustomed to critiquing more stable constructs. Forty years after the successful publication of her first novel, literary criticism of her work remains relatively thin.

Considering Weldon’s general attitude toward academic literature studies, she would likely find a paucity of criticism to be high praise. Yet Weldon has archived her papers at a university and designated an academic humor theorist and professor of literature at the University of Connecticut, Regina Barreca, as her biographer. In “Of Birth and Fiction,” Weldon only partially humorously terms Barreca her “deconstructionalyst” (200). Weldon’s approach to literary criticism, as to many other cultural constructs, remains in flux.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Weldon declares that she sees no value in consistency. As a tactic of negotiation, her (seeming) spontaneity befits contemporary

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19 This situation, however, folds back on itself: Barreca is also a humor writer, having published the bestseller *They Used to Call Me Snow White . . . But I Drifted*. She edited *The Penguin Book of Women’s Humor* and *The Signet Book of American Humor*. She has written extensively (29 books authored and edited) on humor, feminism and literature. Some of her titles indicate a Weldon-esque approach to culture: *Babes in Boyland: A Personal History of Co-Education in the Ivy Leagues* and *Perfect Husbands (and Other Fairy Tales)*.
mass media, but it challenges literary and other critics. Weldon has knowingly constructed her position as a woman of letters within the context of a culture industry in which all is objectified for consumption: the work of art, the female body, human identity, language itself, and even the figure of the writer per se. Aware that mass market capitalism relies on products continually touted as new and improved, Weldon exploits the aspects of public intellectualism and academia that also depend on the new and improved. For this reason also, Weldon and her oeuvre present difficulties for critics.

Finaula Dowling despairs of the gap in Weldon’s works between high and popular literature, terming *Little Sisters* (1977) a “potboiler”: “The appreciable difference in quality between *Little Sisters*—about which there is so little to say—and Fay Weldon’s subsequent novel, *Praxis*—which demands serious critical consideration—is an early warning of the author’s uneven output” (58). Dowling’s evaluation, although accurate, judges Weldon’s work on the principle that writers strive to be highly literary authors of finely wrought artistic works. But like her uncle Selwyn Jepson, her grandfather Edgar Jepson, and her mother Margaret Birkinshaw, Weldon writes commercially. Her openly financial aims fall outside the ideologies of high culture—a theme she explores in the novel *The Bulgari Connection* (2000). Constructing herself as an openly commercial worker-writer and concentrating on consciousness-raising, with a corresponding lack of emphasis on aesthetics, Weldon causes a high-culture reputation to be moot, even though the sociological production of culture perspective posits that certain works or authors may be promoted from popular to high culture.20

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20 See Jane Tompkins on Nathaniel Hawthorne (1985).
Throughout her career Weldon has demonstrated little interest in aesthetics, aiming instead to fulfill the instructive function of art. Her attempts to deconstruct mass culture by framing postmodern perspectives in popular genres trouble those critics—for example, Louis Simpson—who expect certain (modernist) aesthetic qualities. Weldon prefers and carefully preserves her slapdash image: “I write first and think later and make things up as I go along . . .” (9 Mar. 2001). She further asserts, “all I wanted to do was communicate” and “I never run out of things to say” (qtd. in Kenyon, Women Writers 193, 195). By saying everything, Weldon critiques herself, intensifying the critical problem; her literary production “enforces skepticism about the power of representation” (Yaeger 272), leaving critics the task of developing vocabulary adequate to evaluate shifty postmodern fiction.

Moreover, Weldon’s style alone seems too funny, breezy, and slick to sustain text-based critical inquiry. Derived from the principles of commercial advertising and television screenplays, her prose repels the deep analysis of traditional criticism. In contrast, A. S. Byatt’s novel Possession (1990) draws readers ever deeper into a mysterious, self-contained world spiraling so far inward and backward in time that readers come to doubt its fictionality. In Byatt’s novel, possession is both theme and method, and into such, critics can delve deeper and deeper. Weldon’s rhetoric, however, with its flippant authorial intrusions and jerky undercutting comments, does not create a self-contained world. As Kenyon observes, “Her acerbity alienates in order to enforce reflection” (“Radicalizing” 111).

It has been said of Joyce Carol Oates that were she not so prolific, her literary reputation might be higher. The same might be said of Weldon had she written only a
few novels and some outstanding plays. Even she admits that “prolific is not a respectable thing for any writer to be,” but, puncturing the conventional artistic value of rarity, adds, “I could [say] that others read too slowly, not that I write too fast” (qtd. in Kenyon, Women Writers 206).

So, added to the impossibility of treating the full oeuvre of a currently productive writer is Weldon’s prolific output. Constantly taking up the next literary project, Weldon takes working more seriously than her works, uneven quality seeming less important than continuing to produce. Within the last seven years, she has published copiously, some of these productions being hard-to-evaluate formal experiments: a commissioned novel, The Bulgari Connection (2000); her truncated autobiography, Auto da Fay: A Memoir (2002); an adaptation of Flaubert’s novel into a stage play, Madame Bovary: Breakfast with Emma (composed 2000, produced 2003); a “reality novel”—a novel of gender-swapping interleaved with her memoir-writer’s diary—Mantrapped (2004); an adaptation of the French novel The Devil in the Flesh (1921) into lyrics for the first cinematic opera (2005); her twenty-sixth novel, She May Not Leave (2006); and a mix of philosophy, short stories, and self-help in What Makes Women Happy (2006). Aside from the need for considered reflection as a high culture activity, literary criticism does not itself support its practitioners. However, even though critics cannot stay abreast of Weldon’s production, each of her works and her overall extensive literary production deserve study for their satire, humor, and social and metafictional commentary.

Connected to the problem posed by prolific output, and perhaps its cause, is Weldon’s fearlessness. As H.G. Wells remarked of Weldon’s mother, she knows no fear. Although Weldon is well aware of reviews and criticism, she asserts: “I like approval like
anybody else, but I don’t need it and I don’t depend on it” (qtd. in Pearlman 86).

Weldon’s decision to write a privately commissioned novel, *The Bulgari Connection* exemplifies this attitude; she rejects the literary world’s unwritten rules that could increase her critical status. Ironically, *The Bulgari Connection* is among Weldon’s best designed novels. Although enthusiastic readers ignore, or are ignorant of, Weldon’s refusal to participate in literature according to ideologically approved practices and attitudes, from critical quarters she has received much criticism, partially by anticipating cultural developments.

**Ahead of Her Time**

For some decades Weldon seems to have had her finger on the pulse of British mass culture. But mass culture changes slowly, and Weldon’s prescience has not necessarily advanced her career. Weldon’s plays and novels anticipate and accompany the theory Hélène Cixous articulated in 1976 in “The Laugh of the Medusa”: when the repressed returns to Weldon’s protagonists, they “[shatter] the framework of institutions, [blow] up the law, and [break] up the ‘truth’ with laughter.” In 1967, Weldon addressed eating disorders, which she had herself experienced, in *The Fat Woman’s Joke*. Its publication preceded the common use and understanding of *anorexia* and *bulimia*. In the United States, the novel was re-titled euphemistically . . . *And the Wife Ran Away* (1997), the elision of the word *fat* perhaps indicating an increasing preoccupation with poor body image and, therefore, decreased marketability. Similarly, *Big Women*, which treated the lives of Second Wave feminists, was re-titled *Big Girls Don’t Cry* (1998) in the United States. In 1969, Weldon’s *Smoke Screen* aired on the prestigious Wednesday night *Play for Today*. Written when the causation of disease by cigarette smoking was just
emerging, *Smoke Screen* concerns a family man, working in advertising on a tobacco account, who is a smoker and dies of lung cancer. The play aired successfully, with high ratings, to an audience of approximately fourteen million, but the BBC told Weldon she was stirring up trouble by frightening the audience and blacklisted her for a time. Too, the publication of *Puffball* in 1980 preceded a shift away from androgyny in radical feminism: Weldon was criticized for promulgating the sanctity of motherhood.

For her ideologically unsound formal experiments and adaptations, Weldon receives much censure. The novel interwoven with the memoir-writer’s diary *Mantrapped* is “a deranged composite” to reviewer Claudia FitzHerbert. In the stage play *Madame Bovary: Breakfast with Emma* (2004), Weldon’s perspective on the action enraged reviewers and critics. She declares, “I knew the woman better than did Flaubert, and . . . the husband too, and the lovers . . .” (*Mantrapped* 122). But Charles Spencer finds the play “leaden and impertinent . . . a masterpiece reduced to a soap opera . . . a stale old melodrama.” That audiences loved this play indicates the efficacy of Weldon’s revisions of mass and high culture, using popular culture as a vehicle. Playgoers filled the theatre and gave *Breakfast with Emma* standing ovations.

Still, some believe Weldon has received some but not enough critical attention in one professional area, her dramatic production, especially television screenplays.

*Television Literature*

Because Weldon wrote prolifically for television during the late 1970s and 1980s, her construction by academic television critics deserves analysis. Julia Hallam, for instance, believes that although Weldon was a darling of the BBC during the 1980s, her place in British television history and criticism is far from assured. Although her script
for the first episode of *Upstairs Downstairs* won an award from the Writers’ Guild of Great Britain, Weldon was fired after only a few episodes for her socialist emphasis on downstairs.\(^2\)

In 1991, Clive James told the Royal Television Society that “[a] television programme is not a commodity. It might become one, but it begins as a labour of love.” Drama critic George W. Brandt “argues the case for television playwriting as a legitimate form of drama, deserving of respect as much as any other form of playwriting and hence worthy of study.” Although the adaptation of novels is “a sore point with many critics who deplore this as an inherently second-rate form of writing,” Brandt questions privileging the single-author text; whether the television play is an adaptation or not, the writer must still write it (1980s 1). He observes that writing for television is “a significant art form—but one lacking the sanction of literary esteem” (1980s 2).

Although television studies have grown exponentially since his publication of *British Television Drama* in 1981, they tend to focus on the sociological rather than the aesthetic, and transfer emphasis from the writer to the aired program, which necessarily adds production factors to the text. Still, television drama has developed into a respectable discipline of academic study.

John Tulloch articulates the complexities of criticism of quality television drama: “The social location is the alliance between a liberal academia and a ‘critical’ media practice which allows the ‘ventilation’ of public issues; and the ideological work of the discourse is in promoting ‘creativity’ (though occasionally ‘politics’) to a ‘mass audience’ by way of, primarily, public service television” (qtd. in Brandt, 1980s 3).

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\(^{2}\) When Jane and Fay were children, their mother had worked as a housekeeper, the family living downstairs.
Although his terminology varies from the differentiations of mass, popular, and high culture made by Jonathan Culler, the constructs are similar: liberal academia (high culture) joins media practice (mass culture) to examine issues of mass culture through art (encompassing beauty and truth) for a mass audience (popular culture). As Brandt observes, television drama often gains “distinctive character” by breaking through genre conventions, in this case, cultural conventions (1980s 6). Brandt’s observation applies to Weldon’s novels and scripts; both break through genre conventions.

Weldon used genre mixtures (drama documentary/fiction, advertising, soap opera, social realism, romance, comedy, the supernatural, horror, and science fiction) that created an anti-realist, self-parodying attitude. Critic Mary Ellen Brown finds parody “central to ‘feminine discourse’” because in mocking dominant practices, parody becomes other and voices “potential resistance”; the secret coding (in this case, parody) “invites the audience to analyse the joke, complete its meaning, and recognize that the inept, corrupt, parodic target is no laughing matter” (qtd. in Brandt, Drama (1981) 42-44). The potential aspect of resistance leaves open the possibility of being taken only humorously. Hallam, Brown, and Madeleine Macmurrough-Kavanagh observe that this dynamic made parodic literature by women suitable for transmission because their seriousness could go unnoticed. Weldon’s work, then, likely appealed to producers and critics because it was suitable for women’s writing: it was not to be taken seriously.

Moreover, the conditions of production at the time sustained a double standard: “Don’t let’s have any Woman’s Own\(^{22}\) writing,” women writers were told. At the same

\(^{22}\) A popular British weekly aimed at women, containing information on fashion, beauty, cookery, and consumer tips. It also contains health and family pages, nonfiction stories, and articles on celebrities. *Woman’s Own* might correspond to some U.S. publications, such as *Redbook*, *Woman’s Day*, or *McCall’s*. 88
time, swearing was inappropriate for women characters, and scenes of gritty realism were softened by rewriting or romanticized with music and lighting (Hallam 142). Television critics Hallam, Brown, Macmurraugh-Kavanagh, Bird, and Eliot all observe that few women writers were included in the acclaimed anthology series of single plays, *The Wednesday Play*, although many series and plays by women drew large audiences and favorable ratings. Hallam notes that Weldon has received scant attention from the critical establishment” and fears that Weldon’s work, like that of “nineteenth-century popular literary foremothers” will disappear unless it receives critical evaluation (143). Not to be critically constructed is to be returned to the conditions defined in Chapter 1 when the intellectual woman was nonexistent, invisible, or dispensable. However, in contrast to other film and television critics, Dickinson credits Weldon for using fantastic elements in ways that led British filmmakers to expand their vision into fantasy, and critic Thomas Elsaesser suggests that Weldon and Angela Carter (*The Magic Toyshop*, 1986) present television drama parallel to the often fantastic films of directors prominent in the 1980s New British Cinema.23

*Negotiating Cultural Adaptations*

Brandt raises the question of whether screen adaptations of novels are second-rate writing, and, although that question will not be explored here, I do believe that adaptations are culturally revealing constructions of novels. In a rather literal sense, *broadcast* means that cultural mandates will affect adaptation of novels. As touched on

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23 New British Cinema emerged during a transition from a long Conservative government to the election of New Labour. Its films include *Trainspotting, Bean*, and *The Full Monty*. Examples of gritty docudrama-naturalism include *Under the Skin, Nil by Mouth*, and *TwentyFourSeven*.
in Chapter 2, Weldon’s novel *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* was adapted in 1986 as a television miniseries, which won a British Academy of Film and Television arts award for best drama series. In the novel, Weldon caricatures the romantic triangle of a faithful wife, Ruth, an unfaithful husband, Bobbo, and a beautiful mistress, Mary Fisher. According to Weldon, the BBC rejected her adaptation because it was not true to the spirit of the novel—rather cruel, hard, and harsh.

Instead, the established television writer Ted Whitehead adapted the novel with the intention of making “the husband and mistress more realistic.” Weldon observed that her adaptation was “less about the men and more about the women” (qtd. in Bird & Eliot 218). Action being film’s métier, Whitehead’s screenplay emphasizes Ruth’s revenge, recalling the revenge play’s intense action. Whitehead’s changes create greater audience focus on and sympathy for Bobbo and Mary Fisher. In the novel, Weldon emphasizes an emotion, Ruth’s envy of Mary Fisher—her great beauty, and the power it has over men. Not as concerned with Bobbo as the screenplay’s action indicates, Ruth focuses on her own face and body, which defy society’s agreed-upon signifiers for women. Overall, the screenplay evens the focus on Bobbo and Ruth, indicating that on television an ugly, angry woman is unworthy of the entire attention paid to her in the novel. Ruth, a lumpy, overweight, 6-foot 2-inch, brunette female with facial hair, moles, and willpower does not bear so much watching by a mass audience as slim, petite, blonde Mary Fisher. Aimed at the popular audience, the television production thins Weldon’s concentration on a woman. The hard-edged novel that Weldon has called “delinquent” was softened and blurred.
Despite her willingness to adapt the work of others, Weldon has been protective of the rights to her original works. But ever aware of marketability, Weldon approved the BBC production of *She-Devil*. She thought Whitehead’s version worked well “because it was adapted by somebody, though white and male, who comes from the same culture as me and . . . produces the kind of thing that I would have produced” (qtd. in Kumar). Were Weldon dissatisfied with Whitehead’s adaptation, she might be hoist by own petard since, until the publication of *Mantrapped*, she asserted that “no author owns their work, a story is public property” (qtd. in Bird & Eliot 218).

But if the British screenplay softened and blurred *She-Devil*, the American version obscured it entirely. Jonathan Bret, Barry Strugatz, and Mark R. Burns adapted the novel for an Orion feature film, directed by Susan Seidelman. The Orion film reduces the novel to a Hollywood formula; it does not attempt to disturb the social order but to reinscribe it. The British cautionary tale of adultery and identity becomes a broad American comedy. Film critic Pamela Katz points out that in the novel Ruth frees herself from the oppression of mass culture: “I cast off the chains that bound me down, of habit, custom, and sexual aspiration; home, family, friends—all the object of natural affections” (114). But the Orion film “refused to acknowledge the evil component in the novel” (115). In it, Ruth punishes Bobbo by sending him to jail to teach him a lesson he learns easily, and she takes the children to visit him, implying that the family will live happily ever after. Katz points out the irony in this surgical reduction of a metafictional novel about the lies of romantic pulp fiction. Weldon joins Katz in commenting that the Orion

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24 In 1991, when Granada Television contracted to adapt *The Cloning of Joanna May* as a miniseries, both Whitehead and Weldon worked on the screenplay.
version should have been called *She-Angel* because Hollywood was “busy trying to make it ideologically sound” (qtd. in Kumar).

Film critic Robert Dickinson finds it odd that the Orion film “omitted Weldon's most visually rich and outrageous portion, the fantastic surgical reconstruction of the She-Devil into her nemesis, the physical form of female romantic perfection.” Dickinson praises Weldon’s “Mary Shelley-like coupling of deliberately excessive Gothic fantasy with sharp feminist perception.” But Dickinson does not take into account the conservative forces of American mass culture who believe, like the novel’s Lady Bissop, “We should surely put up with what He gives us . . .” (*She-Devil* 168). Surgeries as extreme as those Ruth forces her doctors to perform violate unspoken cultural limitations on identity construction. Despite its own citizens’ medical procedures and surgeries, Hollywood’s version of profitability lies in soothing, not repulsing, its audience.

**Literary Criticism**

Mass and high cultures expect in literature certain characteristics, which Weldon habitually avoids, satirizes, and exploits. Critic Margaret Ann Doody summarizes Weldon’s approach to the novel: she ignores the aesthetic, conceptual, and structural rules (45). So the overall basis for which Weldon’s literary production receives criticism is its iconoclastic qualities. These have been covered to an extent in Chapters 1 and 2, but briefly they include, in the area of content, privileging concentration on flawed, riotous women over that of men and children, nearly exclusive portrayal of the middle classes, intellectual sloppiness, and an uneasy, shifting feminism; in the area of style, deconstructive narrative strategies contrary to modernist aesthetic values, and tones that include hysteria; a survivalist spirit of hate, anger, and bitterness; dark humor; flippancy;
brittleness; indelicacy; and even brutality. This summary catalog opposes ideologies for womanhood even now, when contemporary women are not expected always to remain modest, chaste, and silent. However, Weldon’s critical supporters, like her readers, value these qualities most for their forthright, if messy, expression of authentic female experience. Furthermore, these qualities contrast artistic invalidism. As Weldon comments about a once brilliant but declining television series: “There is construction here, and description, but no invention” (Letters to Alice 65).

Weldon has been generally criticized for failing to develop her male characters, for treating children cavalierly, and for (the same elitism attributed to the Women’s Movement) too much attention on the Caucasian middle classes. Disapproved of for giving men short shrift in her novels, she replies, “Well, it’s not about them, is it? . . . Let the men liberate themselves, it’s time they did it.” Even so, for her women characters, “terrible creatures,” unworthy and polygamous, Weldon never posits a higher moral ground than for men (qtd. in Haffenden 313). Perhaps especially to some male critics’ chagrin, her female characters are constructed as Virginia Woolf requested, in their friendships and every other sort of woman-to-woman relationship, with all their complexities made extant. Lorna Sage differentiates Weldon’s fictional representation of “invariably partisan” female characters from the fictional world of Margaret Drabble and Iris Murdoch. Weldon’s are foregrounded to reveal “desires and thoughts that usually remain unspoken” (Kenyon, “Radicalizing” 18). Weldon’s men remain mostly in the background.

25 Essays recommended for extended descriptions of Weldon’s style include: “Divided Amongst Ourselves” by Lorna Sage; “Fay Weldon and the Radicalizing of Language” by Olga Kenyon; and “Feminism and Art in Fay Weldon’s Novels” by Agate Nesaule Kouse.
The skimpy treatment of children, I suspect, results not only from insistence on women’s subjectivity separate from biological function and social roles but also relates to the splitting of Weldon’s professional and personal lives, as described in Chapter 2. Acutely conscious of publicity’s effects on her marriage, she may have protected her sons by minimizing children’s roles in her loosely autobiographical fictions. For her critical reputation, this strategy dovetails with her portrayals of children as liabilities in their parents’ administered lives. In a post-agricultural, post-industrial, post-feminist culture, children can serve little practical function: a potential earner often has either to forego a wage or pay for expensive child care.

In a 1985 interview Weldon opines that writing about the working classes is difficult “because if you’re dealing with people who are not practiced in dealing with abstract thought . . . or who aren’t practiced in expressing their thoughts with any subtlety, you have to spend your entire time with internal monologue, which I don’t particularly enjoy writing. . . .” Believing that men have a better chance to find suitable situations in life, she also says, “You get extremely vocal cleaning women, for example, who are highly intelligent but because of lack of education and opportunity have been kept to a certain level in society” (qtd. in Haffenden 311). These statements reveal certain elitist assumptions and actions on Weldon’s part, and certain artistic limitations in her oeuvre.

Overall, early criticism of Weldon places her work among experimental novels by British and American women writers; for instance, Margaret Atwood, A.S. Byatt, Angela Carter, Margaret Drabble, Doris Lessing, and Jeannette Winterson. Along with them, Weldon was constructed as a lively feminist writer who spoke the previously unspeakable
about authentic female experience in language that transformed the novel genre.

Weldon’s novels address the previously forbidden or covertly approached topics of “sexual initiation, marriage, infidelity, divorce, contraception, abortion, motherhood, housework and thwarted careers” (Krouse 5). Feminist critics elevate Weldon because she elevates the significance of women’s lives in all their iterations and complexities, including the domestic. She is seen by feminist critics as performing a role similar to that of the observantly truthful child in the fable “The Emperor’s New Clothes.”

Later critics of Weldon’s novels begin to specialize, but their constructions meld to cast Weldon generally in a role of reifying women as they existed pre-Enlightenment or outside of the age of mechanical reproduction. Especially in relation to the powers of language, feminist critics applaud Weldon’s usurpation of language for feminist purposes: she appropriates, satirizes, reduces, and regresses its phallogocentrism. Sage views Weldon as bold, sketchy, and nasty—free from the need for an approved, unified, writerly voice. Nancy Walker and Barreca point out Weldon’s primitive use of language to evoke its magical powers. Walker notes that Weldon uses the fairy tale to critique the power of women’s tales mostly in the positive. For the Victorian literate classes, these previously oral tales were sanitized for instilling in young women proper behavior, but Weldon takes them back to their vulgar origins, “recover[ing] for fiction a disruptive, irreverent character that recalls the instability and endless revision of the oral tradition” (Walker, “Witch” 9).

Weldon’s female, urban characters live, like their distant foremothers, in the stories they have been told. Critics interpret Weldon’s use of shifting point of view in which characters write their life stories as they live them as a strategy for establishing
identity and agency. The act of telling one’s life story in shifting points of view enables female characters to define their distinct selves, in Weldon’s case, the “overworked mother,” the “hardworking writer,” and the “inactive depressive” (Kenyon, “Radicalizing” 113). At the same time, the very definition of separate selves provides clarity which, if it does not effect integration of personality, at least provides an acceptance and comfortable blurring of the selves. Women’s stories, oral or written, include past and present; Weldon constructs women’s life histories with a mirroring that “reveals the past as structured by the present, as well as the other way around” (Sage 155). Such individualistic historical revisionism enables Weldon’s characters to reconstellate language to construct identities in the present by telling and retelling their stories. Tales and life meld into an indistinguishable blend, but in the process conventional views of women’s lives are subverted and women’s existence is “demystified” (Walker, “Ironic” 205). Critics have thus ascribed to Weldon the reclamation of pre-Enlightenment womanhood, the wise woman, a witch helping women restore faith in their feelings, knowledge, and perceptions outside the prescriptive language of the father and the scientific, administered life. Resentful of the common perception that Weldon is doing something entirely new, Margaret Anne Doody places her outside the pagan tradition to which others allude, in the “classical vein” (56). Doody justifies as classical Weldon’s treatment of her characters, calling Weldon’s power to explore situations “expressive situational narrative”—in which the situation is the chief image and object for which the characters exist” (47). Similarly to Greek drama, the audience (or reader) considers character as revealed by dilemma.
Without narrowly focused argument or competing critical discourse, the articles discussed above function as descriptions in a literary, feminist, high subculture; other critics construct Weldon according to their own disciplines. Popular culture critic Jeanne Dubino traces connections between pulp fiction and the oppression of male-dominated capitalist practices. She praises *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* for its savage satiric condemnation of the romance novel and protagonist Ruth as a self-deceived woman affirming an oppressive economic system. While this description may hold true, Weldon’s own attitude toward pulp fiction is flexible. In “On the Reading of Frivolous Fiction,” she declares that it can be fantastic. What many critics miss is that Weldon, like Austen’s Elizabeth Bennett, is fond of professing opinions not actually her own. In Dubino’s case, and that of other critics, Weldon is taken literally, at her word, but Weldon means to inspire reflection, not prescribe the rules of life.

Critics have begun of classifying Weldon’s productions from various standpoints, and their work indicates Weldon’s accepted establishment and ongoing role as a woman of letters. Dividing Weldon’s novels into three periods before the mid-1980s, Jenny Newman cites changes in narrative qualities from avoidance of interior monologue in favor of intimate conversations between women, to an increasingly astringent tone, carefully qualified optimism, and characters shrunken to make space for Weldon’s moral vision. Attempts to place Weldon’s seven pre-1988 novels among their contemporaries, Kenyon finds *The Shrapnel Academy*, a diatribe against war, less successful than others: to explain, Kenyon quotes Anita Brookner: “Where there is too much indignation, the satire vanishes” (“Radicalizing” 124). Elaine Tuttle Hansen approaches the novels sociologically, arguing that Weldon has portrayed three stages of
thinking about motherhood. These stages reflect the feminist stages of “harsh repudiation; sentimental recuperation; and confusion, conflict, and a silencing sense of impasse” (184). In 1998, Lana Faulks and Finuala Dowling both published critical volumes that similarly group Weldon’s novels according to thematic development. In *Fay Weldon’s Fiction*, Dowling groups themes as follows: feminist issues, social constructions of womanhood, Lacanian mirror-stage theory, relation to the humor theories of Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson, “the problems of Weldon’s descent from the sublime to the banal,” and finally, “retreat from polemic” but continuation of “narrative experimentation and metafictional exercise” (146). Weldon is again critiqued for privileging moral dilemma over careful character development, by Newman, and for her refusal to portray hegemonic wisdom, by Hansen. Although feminist critics approve Weldon’s postmodernism, they also reveal their own modernist tendencies. In contrast, Dowling regrets Weldon’s move away from sharp feminist argument into the formal experimentation that might seem modernist. Dowling’s phrase, “metafictional exercise,” deflates what others see as Weldon’s significant challenge to and statements on the novel genre. From individual standpoints, each of these critics implies that with a diminishing quality of production, Weldon’s career has careened downward from its apex, which they do not define. At the same time, however, their intention of establishing Weldon’s periods of creativity institutionalizes her oeuvre within critical literature.

**Non-Feminist Critical Constructions**

F. R. Leavis finds Weldon’s works outrageous and obsessive. In a 1994 review of *Affliction*, the novel that skewered the therapy industry, he finds Weldon’s humor to “have the air of a fascinated hysteria” (365). He denigrates her “usual throw-away irony
of light contempt . . . [for] middle-class characters” and “contempt in her manipulation of her audience” comparing Affliction to Puffball. Leavis, though disapproving, understands her aims: “Weldon’s tart and slick satire is I think basically geared to bourgeois entertainment technically called ‘easy-read,’ but is ‘roguish’ in being aimed at both the society that needs therapists and at ridiculing the dangerous and fraudulent quackery itself” (454). Leavis further excoriates Weldon for unawareness of her didactic tendencies and an “insanely disgusted” vision of human beings. Lest one be left in doubt, Leavis closes with the observation that Weldon leaves the “enduring impression . . . of a generalized disturbance amounting to hysteria” (446). The contempt that Leavis shows for Weldon’s work typifies some criticism, which has only a tendency to divide along gender lines. But Juliet Mitchell normalizes hysteria: “The woman novelist must be an hysteric. Hysteria is the woman’s simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organisation of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism” (289-290).

Alan Wilde regards The Life and Loves of a She-Devil as “a truer picture of our current intellectual climate” than either modernist or postmodernist views (403). Readerly sympathy for Ruth indicates Weldon’s skill and the attractions of feminism, but more importantly, “the notion of cultural crisis”26 related to Weldon’s work within mass, high, and popular cultures. In all, he critiques She-Devil for embodying a less than artistic form: early and recurrent climactic moments, a less than unifying vision of Terence’s comic oxymoron, “moderation in all things,” an extension of authorial distance beyond that of nail-paring god, and failure to embody the writer’s beliefs. Wilde finds that interpretation of fiction remains problematic when “life’s disjunctions and

discontinuities” are expressed without “the unity and coherence of aesthetic form” (409). Doody agrees that conceptually Weldon’s novels “wobble a little on their axes” (45). Wilde presumes that Weldon “intends unity” but radically shifts the novel’s ethical grid halfway through. Wilde believes that the presentation of extremes by implication advocates a middle ground: “her never thoroughly acknowledged or integrated attraction to an ethic of means and middles” (415). This contention takes as its type Weldon’s faux advice in *Remember Me* (1976), “Be bold, but not too bold” (10). However, it fails to take into account Weldon’s consistent use of distancing irony. Some of Wilde’s other assumptions include poetic justice: for “the folly of her hubris,” readers perceive that Ruth deserved the “result of her grotesque aspirations and acts” (414). Wilde’s term *deserved* indicates punishment; however, Ruth rests content, and by that readers, in my experience, are not gratified but awestruck. These criticisms resonate with modernist expectations, intentional fallacy, and literal rather than ironic readings.

Wilde’s interpretation of a disastrous dinner party that incites the action of *She-Devil* gives Ruth the deliberate agency that she does not possess. Wilde describes it: “Ruth, exasperated by Bobbo’s ‘neglect and unkindness,’ drops the food on the floor and tells her in-laws of their son’s latest extramarital adventure” (404). But Ruth is far beyond exasperated; she verges on complete emotional collapse. Bobbo’s neglect and unkindness are manifested in a series of sexual dalliances and a serious love affair reported in excruciating detail to Ruth—to heighten his sexual pleasure. Her vision obscured by tears before the dinner party, Ruth burns her fingers on the oven door, starts from the pain, and the food falls to the floor. Bobbo self-servingly preserves the happy-
marriage fiction and Ruth retaliates from the kitchen door: “[Bobbo] doesn’t think of me anymore. He only ever thinks about Mary Fisher . . . . She’s his mistress” (45).

Too, Wilde believes that Ruth’s goal of changing her “masculine” appearance to “feminine” is trivial; he writes, “There is no question but that Weldon agrees and that we are meant to as well” (405). Although Weldon does seem to denigrate the particular image Ruth desires, that of Mary Fisher, the novel’s entirety voices the impact on women’s lives of their signifying bodies. In reference to She-Devil, an interviewer asked Weldon what she sees as most damaging to women as they grow up. Weldon replied, “Too fat to be acceptable, wrong colour, wrong legs . . . ” (qtd. in Handschuh). These two examples of dichotomous readings indicate how cultural standpoints inform the constructions of Weldon’s critical status. In each example, Wilde seeks to reduce or trivialize Weldon’s work.

**Serious Humor**

A cultural requirement of writers of serious literature is seriousness. Weldon’s one novel nominated for the Booker Prize approached this requirement: “I took out about a third of the funny lines in Praxis, because it’s actually quite a serious book. I fear that my instinct, which I shudder against all the time, is always to trivialize everything” (qtd. in Haffenden 317). But the trivializing of comedy belongs not only to Weldon. Tragedy is assumed superior to comedy even though comedies can powerfully illuminate human life. Feminist critics celebrate Weldon for “writing feminist comedy, demonstrating that feminism is neither humorless nor impossible to assimilate into a work of art” (Krouse 20). Krouse finds Weldon’s humor sympathetic and incisive in contrast to the “cold brittleness” of, for example, Mary McCarthy (12). Others find Weldon’s humor not only
brittle, but occasionally brutal. Olga Kenyon places Weldon’s humor with that of Jane Austen and Iris Murdoch for farce, Rose Macauley for parody, and Ivy Compton-Burnett, Muriel Spark, and Beryle Bainbridge for black humor. Barreca, a humor theorist and humor writer herself, has written extensively on Weldon’s mordant, dark, deadpan humor that “gleefully threatens and subverts the dominant order.” Barreca theorizes that without the pleasure Weldon’s humor provides, women cannot perceive “deeply embedded forms of cultural and personal repression” (“Let Us Now” 142).

But satire sometimes backfires, as Jonathan Swift found with “A Modest Proposal.” In characterizing The Cloning of Joanna May as a one-dimensional critique about the male bastion of science trampling women’s rights, Rose Quiello casts Weldon as the party-line feminist she has never been. Quiello omits that because Joanna’s maliciously reproduced clones supply a surprising joy to Joanna’s formerly bleak, lonely life, the male bastion of medicine experiences the turning of the (examining) table. But Weldon’s comedy does sometimes obscure its own seriousness. As Brookner points out, indignation can undercut satire. Reviewer Judy Cooke observes that “Weldon’s prose has now been polished to such a finish that a[t] times it works against the significance of what is described.” Too, comedy by women in a male-dominated genre may be deemed acceptable because, since it is written by a woman, it need not be taken seriously. Barreca asserts that “[w]omen have been outsiders in this culture, but when they use humor, they become outlaws” (“Let Us Now” 142). Perceiving women’s comedy in its subversive manifestations as a threat to the dominant order, culturally conservative critics have a vested interest in ensuring that comedy, including Weldon’s, is relegated to second-class literary status.

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Some critics have characterized Weldon’s humor as carnivalesque, temporarily suspending legitimatized authority. Barreca characterizes Weldon’s humor, not as catharsis or reconciliation, but as purposing to show authority is bogus. Going a step further, critic John Glavin characterizes Weldon’s humor as frivolity that seeks “immortality and completeness of its own designation” (136). In *Leader of the Band* (1988), protagonist Starlady Sandra declares, “I have become both tough and frivolous” (34). To Starlady Sandra frivolity means “[f]orm, style, content—in that order of importance,” form being “the intricate patterns which contain the key . . .” and content “the mere stuff of the universe . . . last and least” (8). This construction of Weldon’s humor as frivolity serves as counterpoint to the depersonalizing, commodifying effects of loss of aura as theorized by Benjamin, and to the limitations of mind resulting from the administered life—to Weldon, ergonarchy—as theorized by Horkheimer and Adorno. Glavin reasons that “bourgeois society has insistently dismissed the frivolous with . . . derision . . . because it can’t believe in a viable meaning outside a socially constructed order” (139). In the eighteenth century, the values associated with empiricism, and the emerging economic concept of laissez-faire, helped to denigrate the pursuit of pure enjoyment. The middle classes flourished as mechanical reproduction rose to financial and cultural dominance. Frivolity’s meaning was deflated by the middle class to mean minor, silly, insignificant, and excessive. It was defined in opposition to everything that middle class mass culture prizes: caution, prudence, responsibility, reasonableness, the useful, the serviceable, and fear of power.

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27 Glavin’s reading of Weldon’s *Leader of the Band* and *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* is based on Jacques Derrida’s “The Archaeology of the Frivolous: Reading Condillac.” (Trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1987)
The wild coincidences and gratuitous plotting of Weldon’s novels dovetail with
the frivolous, for as Glavin observes, the frivolous character finds in every happening,
accidental or not, the opportunity for self-empowerment (145). Weldon’s early personal
life, especially in childhood, must have seemed gratuitous, picaresque, and more
bohemian than bourgeois. Yet Weldon remembers that she was “brought up not to
complain” (qtd. in Pearlman 84). In addition to Starlady Sandra, Weldon partially
expresses the character of frivolity through Ruth in She-Devil: “How weak people are!
How they simply accept what happens as if there were such a thing as destiny, and not
just a life to be grappled with” (240). The reification of frivolity combined with
toughness of mind in the face of life’s unpredictability is the source of vitality and appeal
for Weldon’s novels. Unlike the narcissistic protagonists of much contemporary
literature (as well as the heroines of melodrama), who see themselves as central and
passive, Weldon’s women both enjoy and endure life in defiance of the unpredictable,
probably hazardous future.

**Conclusion**

Despite the difficulties of evaluating Weldon’s postmodern, decentered works, the
critics who do engage in such evaluation, seem to have as much enthusiasm for her
novels as her readers have. Especially from a modernist critical standpoint, the flaws of
Weldon’s literary production are myriad, but feminist critics willingly minimize them to
privilege qualities of raw truth, humor, and vitality in the service of improving women’s
lives. In one sense, then, their evaluations are parochial—or chauvinistic. They privilege
also a construction of Weldon’s work that lies outside of the culture industry in the age of
mechanical reproduction and loss of aura. Weldon’s training in composition processes
receives far more attention than her other negotiations within the culture industry, and surprisingly, her work receives little attention from academic television critics. Non-feminist critics have less patience with Weldon’s flaws. They too take chauvinistic positions, based on modernist principles of art, linear logic, and, one suspects, sexism.

Many critics question Weldon’s authorial intrusion and (faux) didacticism. Doody finds Weldon at her best when she “attends inventively to the situation and [does not] overdo . . . the commentary” (43). Weldon sometimes belabors the didactic and bores readers with too many moral choices. But Weldon does not prescribe. Weldon’s concept of reformation, according to Kenyon, corresponds to that set forth by feminist Juliet Mitchell: four constructs “must be transformed: production, reproduction, sexuality, and socialization of children” (“Radicalizing” 104-5). Chapter 4 discusses Weldon’s fictional treatment of these issues in five novels regarded to be among her best and most controversial: *Puffball*; *Praxis*; *The Cloning of Joanna May*; *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*; and *The Bulgari Connection*. 
Chapter 4: Reproduction in Fay Weldon’s Fictions

Introduction

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Horkheimer and Adorno's Frankfurt School colleague, Walter Benjamin, argued that technological reproduction nullifies an art work’s “presence in time and space . . . its unique existence . . . includ[ing] the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years” (3). In this germinal work, Benjamin decries the art work’s loss of aura, its commodification by the power of mechanical reproduction in the regime of industrial capitalism. Like art and the written word, the female body has become a commodity exploited for profit in a variety of ways; the process that Benjamin describes as the nullification of aura reaches beyond the commodification of art and language into human reproduction and identity construction. Fay Weldon’s amazingly prolific literary production explores these nullifications, often presenting the physical and sociological forms of reproduction that characterize women’s lives against cultural backdrops of scientific, medical, psychological, or business reproductions.

This chapter investigates Weldon’s interrogation of reproductive issues, including the commodification of women’s bodies, and of language and literature. I have chosen to focus on certain novels—Puffball; Praxis; The Cloning of Joanna May; and The Life and Loves of a She-Devil—that are generally considered to be among Weldon’s best. These works focus intensely on a range of reproductive issues: pregnancy, the (re)construction
of social roles and the formation of subject positions, and the relationship between the inner self and its perception by others as shaped by physical appearance. In each of these novels, a female protagonist wrestles with the cultural conditions of her identity—heredity, upbringing, and adult self-construction—in relation to the conditions of her reception by society as a woman. I also consider another novel, *The Bulgari Connection*, which reverses the narrative structure of the others: here Weldon deemphasizes character to focus entirely on the workings of the culture industry in the age of mechanical reproduction.

The content and conditions of reception of these five novels illustrate Weldon’s ideological engagement as a woman of letters with the culture industry and the nullification of aura. I begin with *Puffball* (1980) because it explicitly interrogates human reproduction, detailing the effects of gestation on the female body. In *Puffball*, Weldon juxtaposes the experience of three women, their lifestyles, motivations, relationships with men, and their experience of pregnancy. In *Praxis* (1978), short-listed for the Booker Prize and probably her best realized novel, Weldon constructs an eponymous protagonist who adopts identities serially—in fact, paging one by one through society’s catalog of roles for women. Weldon posits that ideologically promulgated social roles train women to deny the complex realities of life by delimiting their self-perceptions. *Praxis* arrived too prematurely in an anti-canonical mode of women’s postmodern writing to be awarded the Booker Prize that critic Finuala Dowling argues it deserved. In *The Cloning of Joanna May* (1989), through a trope of reproduction by cloning, Weldon deconstructs the notion of female identity as defined by the male gaze. Although this novel received positive reviews, it prescribed the furor over
the possibility of cloning human beings that followed the birth of Dolly, a cloned Finn Dorset lamb, in 1997. In what may be her most commercially successful and disturbingly comic novel, *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1993), Weldon creates a grotesque, postmodern, resurrection myth. The protagonist, Ruth Patchett, calls on supernatural powers and exploits the medical marketplace of cosmetic surgery to reproduce herself as a socially desirable product. The last novel considered here, *The Bulgari Connection* (2000), reveals how Weldon, as a woman of letters, relates to and affects the literary marketplace. Weldon accepted a commission—the amount undisclosed—from Francesco Trapani, Chief Executive Officer of the Italian Jewelry house Bulgari, to write a novel of 90,000 words in celebration of a Bulgari store opening on Sloane Street, Knightsbridge, London. In the novel’s text, Weldon delineates the often invisible, interdependent web of relationships between and among the old moneyed and the *nouveau riche*, high and popular culture, and the business and art worlds.

*Puffball*

In childhood, and then again as a young adult during the 1950s, Weldon escaped into science fiction. She read those authors whose works are now considered classics—Isaac Asimov, Philip K. Dick, and Robert Heinlein. Through the 1980s she subscribed to *New Scientist*, a weekly publication, ostensibly to keep up with the total absurdity of reality (e.g., current theories of particle physics) (Haffenden 317). Whether or not reading science fiction piqued her curiosity about actual developments, Weldon has long sustained interest in science, often interrogating the effects on human life of discoveries touted as advances. As noted in Chapter 2, Weldon has decried the loss of aura of the sexual act since its commodification by birth control. Although Weldon spaced the birth
of her four sons and terminated one pregnancy, she fearlessly questions the effect on
human life of casual, irresponsible sexual activity made possible by the efficacy of
modern contraceptives.

Weldon also interrogates the medicalization of human gestation and birthing
processes, once the sole, highly aura-ed responsibility of expectant mothers and wise
women or midwives. Weldon wrote *Puffball* to capture the feelings of being pregnant; at
the same time, she explores pre- and post-Enlightenment attitudes toward pregnancy and
childbirth. Against interwoven chapters, titled “Inside Liffey” that detail scientific
minutiae of human gestation, Weldon juxtaposes a pre-Enlightenment, possibly
supernatural, world of elemental forces, primeval drives, and earth-mothers—all within a
parodic structure of pastoral comedy and suspense novel. Given the fact of reproduction,
*Puffball* concentrates on contrasting the epistemological systems from which people
approach pregnancy, demonstrating that “the mode of human sense perception changes
with humanity’s entire mode of existence . . . [that] human sense perception . . . is
determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances” (Benjamin 4).

This observation by Benjamin is demonstrated too by the novel’s reception. Olga
Kenyon notes that male reviewers showed much interest in *Puffball* (*Women Writers*
196). However, feminists were incensed because Weldon seemed to suggest motherhood
as the ultimate, perhaps only, validation for women. Given Weldon’s narrative strategy,
it is not surprising that feminists criticized *Puffball* when it was published in 1980. In the
interwoven chapters on gestation, which borrow heavily from Gordon Bourne’s manual
on childbirth, *Pregnancy*, Weldon narrates Liffey’s life in passages of depersonalized
medical terminology: “The disintegration and shedding of the uterus lining, signaled by
the withdrawal of oestrogen, would take three days, and thereafter the amount of blood lost would gradually diminish as the uterus healed” (18). Other passages are lyrically deterministic: “Outer Liffey, with her fluttery smiley eyes, sweet curvy face, dark curly hair and white smooth skin. And there was inner Liffey, cosmic Liffey, hormones buzzing, heart beating, blood surging, pawn in nature’s game” (8). Yet other passages overlay biological determinism with a moralistic tone—as in one on the hormonal effects of the birth control pill: “It is not pleasant for a young woman to believe that her behavior is dictated by her chemistry and that her wrongs lie in herself and not in others’ bad behaviour” (10). At that time in the Women’s Movement, Weldon points out, “nobody was meant to take notice of menstrual periods; you weren’t meant to have a gender” (qtd. in Kumar).

Some critics found the scientific language intrusive, regardless of its content. For a similar motif, British novelist Jeannette Winterson also received severe criticism. In Written on the Body, when the ungendered, unnamed narrator’s lover is diagnosed with cancer, the narrator borrows anatomy books for knowledge and comfort: “Within the clinical language, through the dispassionate view of the sucking, sweating, greedy, defecating self, I found a love-poem to Louise. I would go on knowing her, more intimately than the skin, hair and voice that I craved” (111). This narrative strategy has been a recent motif of contemporary British novels, but it harkens to digressive chapters in earlier novels; for instance, Tristram Shandy, Pamela, and Vanity Fair. Repetition of such digressions within the novel form is at once conservative and indicative of ideological changes—science replaces morality based on religion as a frame through which human life is perceived.
Giving birth to four sons over twenty-one years (1956-1977) enabled Weldon to see constructed social change as manifested through the processes of childbirth: “And [with each child] always something had changed . . . the difference in style from one to the next” (qtd. in Pearlman 88). Citing women novelists’ treatment of the birth process, critic Tess Cosslett posits that their aim is often to “undermine or confuse” traditional polarities between well trained but impersonal male obstetricians and the peasant crone, who, though filthy is capable of restoring women’s faith in their bodies’ wisdom (74). Weldon critiques institutionalized childbirth in Britain as a weapon used against women by the male-dominated medical community: while the machinations of bureaucracy and science are inflicted on women, women’s bodies are treated like machines. At the same time, Weldon knows from her own experience that even misogynist clinical practice saves lives. In Puffball, when Liffey’s labor begins because of a misplaced placenta, “blood stream[s] down her legs,” and Liffey narrowly survives a complex, emergency Caesarian delivery (256). While Weldon’s labor with misplaced placenta was less dramatic, she waited fearfully in the hospital for two weeks for the birth of her last baby.

Weldon mocks the natural childbirth myth—go off alone, squat to birth, swaddle, and return to the fields—by having the urban Richard recite its litany. She is acutely aware of the dangers of childbirth in earlier centuries, writing at length about obstetrics in Britain during Jane Austen’s lifetime in Letters to Alice (1984): “Your own chances of dying in childbirth were not negligible and increased with every pregnancy. After fifteen pregnancies (which meant something like six babies brought to term and safely delivered) your chances of dying were . . . one in two” (30). In an interview, Weldon asserts that “for the first part of this century [the twentieth] only one woman in
three in Ireland was married because the penalty of marriage was children and the penalty of children was death” (qtd. in Pearlman 87). In *Puffball*, the minor character, Lally, persuaded in the hippie-like interests of the natural to forgo prenatal care, has a stillborn baby six weeks overdue. Summing up, Cosslett observes that, in *Puffball*, “scientific discourse is set against woolly-minded feminism” (87).

In a 1995 statement, Weldon expresses a view of *Puffball* different than that of reviewers and critics: “It was almost a gynecological textbook on how a baby develops, and how mistaken parents are if they believe that they are the major players in the drama. Babies just exist, in fact, with all their passions and emotions; this was my thesis in the book” (qtd. in Kumar). Although this thesis seems only a minor motif, in the third trimester of Liffey’s pregnancy Weldon does bestow a voice on the fetus: “Eat, said the baby. You must choose now not between good and bad but between the less of evils. Eat, smile, hope” (251). During pregnancy, critic Elaine Tuttle Hansen argues, the woman is both split and doubled in several ways and the dissociative splits that women experience may protect the self: the fetal voice prioritizes the mother’s perception of the baby and prescribes the bonding of mother and child. Liffey’s perception of the baby’s thoughts suggests that pregnant women may be knowing beyond the scientific data provided by a fetal heart monitor. Critic Finuala Dowling interprets the mother-fetus communication as reciprocal, enabling Liffey to restart her arrested maturing process.

Most of Weldon’s protagonists exist in what critic Nancy Walker terms ironic autobiography: while the choral third-person protagonist reflects on the action, the first-person protagonist (re)creates herself and her life in the telling of her story. Only in *Puffball* does Weldon restrict the protagonist to third-person; this seems to indicate Liffey
is without the subject position, merely the pawn of female reproductive physiology.

Since Liffey speaks “I” only in dialog, she is a voiceless fetus in terms of the novel’s structure. Such interpretation, however, ignores the balancing issues of other characters’ reproduction. Mabs and her children suffer because Mabs is happy only when pregnant; otherwise she ignores and abuses her children. Early in the novel, Liffey may be read as infuriatingly naïve and unaware, not only of gestation processes but also of many of life’s gritty practicalities: the importance of reconciling a bank statement, train schedules for Richard’s commute, and so on. Hardships of cottage life and the responsibility of pregnancy force Liffey into reflective examination: “The old Liffey. Little lithe silly Liffey. Liffey remembered her old self with nostalgia, but knew it was gone for good” (239). In the midst of a dangerous labor complicated by hemorrhage and isolation, Liffey perceives that “[t]he baby didn’t have to want to live, it was life” (259). Weldon makes Liffey suffer so that her consciousness of life within and around grows—a theme throughout Weldon’s oeuvre. Weldon does not suggest, however, that Liffey’s personality integrates completely after she gives birth. Instead, the end of the novel seems more like a beginning, hinting that wifehood, motherhood, and selfhood is already pulling Liffey in divergent directions.

Weldon sees novel writing and childbirth as similar creative processes and compares them repeatedly (Kenyon, “Radicalizing” 119). Disregarding infertility and menopause, Weldon disingenuously considers “having babies quite helpful to the creative process because it reminds one that there is always more where that came from and there is never any shortage of ideas or of the ability to create” (qtd. in Rountree 96). Hansen theorizes that feminism’s attitude toward motherhood has developed in three stages:
“harsh repudiation; sentimental recuperation; and confusion, conflict, and a silencing sense of impasse” (184). She argues that Weldon’s oeuvre has often anticipated popular debate on motherhood and critiqued oversimplified views of it. At the same time, Weldon’s writings show no linear development of thought, containing “ambivalence and confusion, uneven change, sudden leaps forward, and violent backlash” (185). However acute these observations, they inappropriately evaluate a postmodern writer who resists hegemony. In *Puffball*, as Kenyon observes, Weldon explores “the struggle between reason and unreason” in a trope of pregnancy (“Radicalizing” 119). Although Weldon resists the co-opting of women’s reproductive agency and bodily processes by the medical community, an action that may be viewed as a primeval power play under the guise of objective rationalism, she acknowledges its life-saving benefits.

**Praxis**

From construction of the elemental role of expectant mother in *Puffball*, *Praxis* moves thematically into other reproductive issues; including how mothering, or its lack, affects daughters. If the physiological functions of pregnancy and birthing can be minutely shaped by human perception as illustrated by *Puffball*, then other, seemingly less physiological events in women’s lives must be even more susceptible to social construction. The text of *Praxis* (1978) catalogs women’s social roles as serial and limiting of women’s agency and often the result of economic forces: “I took all the insults . . . customarily hurled at women . . . —bitch! whore! adultereress [sic]! murderess!—and used fiction to explain why in a patriarchal society, in sheer self
defence, there was often no way women could avoid deserving the insults” (11 Jan. 2001).

*Praxis* contrasts the lives of two illegitimately born, poorly raised sisters. Ostensibly an elderly woman, Praxis recalls episodes that required metamorphoses into selves discrete from previous selves. Praxis and Hypatia cannot construct successful identities, partially because during their childhood no one explains anything to them: “If everything was inexplicable, anything might happen” (21). The younger sister, Praxis, the protagonist, tends to draw unorthodox conclusions through naïve observation of the material world. Hypatia serves as her foil, bowing to social pressure by concealing the unorthodoxies of their lives. Neither strategy prevents the intense pain of living: Hypatia’s sufferings manifest themselves through mental illness caused by the disconnect between theory and practice in which Hypatia exists. The sufferings of Praxis manifest themselves physically through the bodily construct of women’s social roles: whore, angel wife and mother in the suburban home, and murderer. Their lives are deeply informed by social expectations of legitimate reproduction. Their mother, Lucy, is powerless because she is Ben’s mistress, not his wife. Praxis and Hypatia are illegitimate—bastards born outside the social conventions that traditionally control the grounds of production.

As an adult, Praxis cannot construct an identity because of the fracturing that results when a woman experiences sharp discontinuities in the roles she must play throughout life. Disconnection from self and others results from forces external to the

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28 Quotations from the Fay Weldon Discussion Group online are documented parenthetically by the date of posting. The quotations are reproduced as posted. <http://redmond.com/weldon/discuss.html>.

29 “Hypatia, an ancient philosopher, is remembered for her reputation as a learned woman and teacher . . . and the dramatic nature of her horrible death at the hands of the Christians.” (*Hypatia’s Daughters: Fifteen Hundred Years of Women Philosophers.* Ed. Linda Lopez McAllister. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996. xx.)
woman’s control; for example, unmarried parents; a father who physically abuses and then leaves a mother who becomes mentally ill; and the death of her kindly foster mother in the Blitz. Praxis believes that she has reproduced her early fears and desolations in her children. The children then judge “the traumas of their own lives” by that “extreme of terror and horror . . . [the] shrieks of generations growing louder not softer . . .” (24).

 Appropriately, Weldon uses a picaresque, or episodic, structure to tell this story, but the protagonist does not remain static as in traditional picaresque. Instead, she changes so many times that the reader wonders whether the character is the same person. Weldon uses the same technique in Life and Loves of a She-Devil, in which the protagonist, Ruth, changes identity so radically that readers’ sympathy for her fades. Yet Weldon is not trying to capture readers’ sympathy. Her purpose is didactic and libratory: through both humor and revulsion, and through what happens to Praxis, Weldon asks readers to reflect on women’s roles outside the novel construct.

 Of Weldon’s many novels, only Praxis has been nominated as a finalist for the prestigious Booker Prize (1979), but it was not chosen. Weldon’s self-constructed career, writing prolifically for enhanced sales rather than for critical success, sets her apart from more ideologically acceptable men and women of letters. As discussed in Chapter 2, Weldon openly disdains professors, literature departments, writing courses, and literary critics: “I see critics as bus drivers. They ferry the visitors round the City of Invention and stop the bus here or there, at whim, and act as guides, and feel that if it were not for them, there would be no City” (Letters to Alice, 17). However, as Finuala Dowling observes, the pronouncements of critics are of course material to an author’s literary success. Dowling argues that the 1979 Booker decision was unjust by reasoning that
Praxis is the first British interrogative text in which traditional realist discourse is supplanted by “experiments in narrative disorganization, permitting a view of woman as perpetually itinerant and incorrigibly ‘other’” (84).

The 1979 Booker Prize went to Penelope Fitzgerald for Offshore (1978), her novel set in a barge community on the Thames. In Offshore, an impoverished mother and two daughters are rescued by the wealthiest of the barge people, a man who takes a paternal interest in the family. Dowling opines that “single women in leaky boats” needing a responsible man was an idea of “considerable charm in 1979.” She also suggests that the committee may have felt that Fitzgerald was overdue for the Booker. Noting that Weldon was ahead of her time with her “contribution to [a] lively and anti-canonical strain in contemporary women’s fiction” (84), Dowling provides one likely reason for why Praxis did not win.

In 1988, Penelope Lively won the Booker for Moon Tiger (1987), which resembles Praxis in several features. In it, an old woman recalls her life story both in first- and third-person. The protagonist tolerates multiple selves and nonlinear experience: “I am composed of a myriad Claudias . . . [T]here is no sequence, everything happens at once” (2). According to Dowling, “much of what seems striking and innovative [in Moon Tiger] had already been achieved in Praxis” (84). The lively, anti-canonical strain had taken ten years to work its way into Booker Prize ideology. Still, material differences exist between Praxis and Moon Tiger. In Moon Tiger, Claudia’s reminiscences recall a romantic, adventurous time, long ago, and far away. Claudia herself contributes positively to culture through her journalism and history books.
Most significant to my argument is the interference by Praxis with human reproductive activities. Although women’s bodies have been the privileged site of human reproduction, that site has been co-opted through the writings of law, religion, and medicine in a male-dominated society. Laws and practices are inscribed on women’s bodies without their input or permission. Praxis and Hypatia are bastards. Praxis tries mightily to help her friend, Miss Leonard, obtain an abortion: “It seems extraordinary to me that in a world in which men are killing each other by the million, they should strike such attitudes about an unborn foetus” (71). Praxis lives openly with Willie, her lover. She allows the care of Mary, the baby she rescued, to devolve on Willie’s next lover. She whores and unknowingly has sexual intercourse with her father. As a suburban housewife, she participates in wife-swapping and then leaves her husband and two children. She becomes a recognized crusader for abortion rights: “a few came up to her and abused as a mass murderer, killer of unborn children” (238). When baby Mary has grown, she gives birth to a baby with Down’s syndrome: “He’s mongoloid. He’s got a chromosome missing” (241). When Mary leaves the hospital room, “Praxis [takes] a pillow from the bed, turn[s] the baby onto its back and presse[s] the white mass over its face” (242). Subsequently, her notorious murder trial becomes a flash point for abortion debates in Britain, and Praxis receives a two-year jail sentence for the murder.

The novel opens with Praxis newly released from jail, ostensibly an old woman with sparse gray hair, swollen veins in her legs, a lumpy figure, faded, watery eyes, arthritis, and a sore toe, injured by one of many to whom old women are invisible. By the last chapter, Praxis rouses herself to travel to the hospital, where she is recognized, treated, and celebrated. She finds that she is suffering not from senility but malnutrition.
and quickly improves: “I am not nearly so old as I had assumed” (250). Readers may feel misled by the unreliable narrator, but Weldon’s point is that Praxis has misled herself. Praxis says, “I have thrown away my life, and gained it. The wall which surrounded me is quite broken down. I can touch, feel, see my fellow human beings” (251). However poorly she previously perceived people and events in her life, Praxis has liberated herself by telling her story. By extension, Weldon suggests that the formative nature of language can help heal women willing to do the analysis and conceptualization required for writing their lives. The last words of Praxis in the novel—“That is quite enough”—indicate affirmation of her ideologically unacceptable praxis (251).

**The Cloning of Joanna May**

*Praxis* illustrates hegemonic reproductive ideology as a cause of women’s suffering. Hypatia suffers from efforts to build a unified identity that conforms to social convention; Praxis, always a survivor, accepts responsibility for her serial selves, saying, “I did it all to myself,” even as she realizes the coincidences and gratuitousness of her life: “I do not want any of this: it is not what I meant” (250). From the standpoint of a conventional middle class protagonist, *The Cloning of Joanna May* treats similar issues of reproduction and identity formation in tropes of birth control and cloning. Joanna May suffers because, through acceptance of social convention, she has been denied the possibility of having children. Echoing *Puffball*, this novel portrays medical science as a male bastion that denies women their full humanity. In *Joanna May*, Carl May wonders, “What passive creatures women are: They just lie there, trusting, and let the medical profession do what it wants” (46). Joanna finds thirty years later that she has (been) reproduced. Susan Squier, who specializes in feminist criticism of science, argues that
this novel “affirms the notion of a decentered, nonhierarchical subject position” (“Conceiving” 106). Like other authors Squier discusses, Weldon presents cloning as the male yearning for control of life’s creation, but in practice the control backfires. In the *Joanna May*, Weldon fictionally clones a female by asexual reproduction from an unfertilized ovum—in which the female is self-sufficient.

Up to the age of ten, Carl May was chained in a shack with the dogs by his foster mother “to teach him a lesson,” but his achievement of financial success in nuclear power plants after such abuse comes to symbolize hope in Britain (20). He marries Joanna who trusts his success but pities him. Just before their wedding, when Carl May knows the conventional Joanna will not cancel, he informs her of the vasectomy he had at eighteen to end his bloodline. Disappointed, Joanna represses her yearning for children; this later manifests somatically as false pregnancy. The physician recommends pretending that Joanna has had a miscarriage and performing an unnecessary dilation and curettage.

Because the “hysterical pregnancy” reveals that Joanna desires someone other than himself, Carl persuades the physician to take “a truly vigorous egg” without Joanna’s knowledge and clone it into four successfully implanted embryos (43). Carl desires possession of Joanna’s whole being and assumes that his gaze defines her; after her surgical procedure he triumphs, “My lovely wife . . . all for me again” (44). But with the clones he wishes to punish Joanna for her fading beauty with versions of a fresher, slimmer self (46). The clones remain a secret for thirty years until, out of jealousy, Carl’s mistress suggests informing Joanna about the clones’ existence “[t]o take away her singularity” (47).
Carl, and others in this novel, reduce women from full humanity by viewing them as currency or sign, a recurring motif in Weldon’s work. In *The President’s Child* (1982), a character explains that “men . . . pass girls on you know. . . . They’re the same sexually as they are financially. Capitalist to the core. They hand around the wives too . . . (74). After Carl discovers Joanna having an affair, he locks her out of their house and destroys her possessions, including all her family pictures and documents, seeking to nullify her identity. He finds, however, that her existence does not spring from buildings or documents, the artifacts of an administered life. Carl conflates Joanna’s affair with business loss and literally kills the competition—Isaac King, her friend and lover. After they divorce, Carl’s friend Hughie calls to bargain: in exchange for quashing a damaging story about a plutonium leak at a power plant, Hughie wants Carl “to take this bimbo of mine off my hands” (16).

The possibility of cloning a human being has struck deeply against moral and metaphysical beliefs in contemporary society. But in *Joanna May*, published in 1989, human cloning is still science fiction. Its enthusiasm for the multiplicity of identity formation manifests in the aplomb with which protagonist Joanna May and her four reproductions approach shared identity. By detailing each clone’s life, Weldon posits that conditions of gestation, nutrition, upbringing, and culture overwrite genetic destiny. Joanna is startled when she discovers the clones’ existence, but the negative effects that Carl expected backfire. Punning, Weldon exhorts the “I” of Joanna May as formed by the “eye” of the masculine gaze: “If thine eye offend me take a good look at yourself. If thine I offend thee, change it” (324). The literal and figurative mirroring that takes place as Joanna becomes acquainted with her alternative selves enhances her agency: “I,

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Joanna May. No longer ‘Eye.’ Acting; not observing. Doing, not looking” (134).

Joanna’s age—and according to Carl, deteriorating looks—trouble neither Joanna nor the clones. The clones see Joanna not as mother or mentor, but as a friend. All five Joannas construct an innovative, viable social entity with the original Joanna as chairperson.

Weldon posits that shared identity is positive, rather than negative. Joanna laughs and chants, “Multiply me and multiply my soul: divide me, split me; you just make more of me, not less. I will look out from more and different windows . . . and there will be no end to my seeing” (143).

Even though Weldon writes characters in terms of psychology, her true emphasis lies in the exploration of morality. Kenyon observes that like Jane Austen, Weldon prefers to view “the essence of the personal and the emotional in fiction [as] moral” (“Radicalizing” 114). When Weldon presents Joanna’s beauty and fine character as deserving of reproduction, readers are likely to agree. But they are less likely to agree with the cloning of Carl May, for his illegal and immoral acts, however understandable when viewed through a lens of psychological motivation, repulse readers. When he is dying of radiation poisoning, Carl assumes responsibility for his actions and confesses, “My fault.” He begs Joanna, whom he has loved throughout, to allow him the opportunity through science to redeem himself: “Joanna . . . take me, remake me. For God’s sake, remake me” (346). Similar to the nature-nurture dichotomy in *Puffball*, Weldon interrogates biological basis of behavior theories by posing the question, “When reproduced by the medical establishment, can a clone of the evil Carl be raised differently from the original to make a positive legal and moral mark on society?” In the novel, one Joanna clone agrees to be implanted with Carl’s clone and to mother him: all five will
participate in his upbringing. By trusting this futuristic family of women to inscribe socialization on a new Carl, Weldon appears to approve a kind of reproduction that forces of conservative culture find deeply disturbing.

**The Life and Loves of a She-Devil**

*She-Devil* (1983) epitomizes Weldon’s early narrative style: 278 pages of short sentences in large print, short paragraphs with white space between, and short chapters of epigrammatic or balladic prose. But *She-Devil*’s structure reveals itself most notably through certain kinds of reproduction: literalizing of a trite, or dead, metaphor; reversals of the (gothic) romance novel’s structure with its marriage plot and fairy-tale ending; and fantasy. Along with these reversals are oral, sometimes incantatory, motifs suggesting the revenge play, ballad, parable, and folktale. Similarly to *Puffball*, Weldon interleaves brief incantatory balladic chapters in which Ruth reflects chorally on the action: “Mary Fisher lives in the High Tower and considers the nature of loss . . . . Mary Fisher lives in the High Tower and . . . wants to be dead” (55, 185, 243). Furthermore, what Weldon calls her inadvertent subtext—“certain resonances and echoes of language and event” (22 Nov. 2000)—reflects a range of other texts: Genesis, *Paradise Lost*, and the New Testament; Faustian stories and legends; the myths of Pygmalion and Aphrodite; fairy tales such as “Cinderella” and “The Little Mermaid”; the Mary Poppins children’s stories; and Mary Shelley’s gothic tale *Frankenstein*.

According to Regina Barreca, readers understand the traditional language of literature to be metaphoric, but certain feminist novelists produce literature in which

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30 All references are to the New York Ballantine edition unless indicated otherwise in this text.
31 Besides Weldon, these include Muriel Spark, Doris Lessing, May Sinclair, and Margaret Atwood.
dead metaphors are literally revived. In so doing, it refuses to reproduce the social order of the father. The effect of metaphor-into-narrative is comic but subversive, or “apocalyptic,” rather than relieving (163). In She-Devil, metaphor-into-narrative is central: in the opening pages, Ruth locks herself in the bathroom while her husband Bobbo excoriates her through the keyhole. Similarly to the catalog of insults used as a structural device in Praxis, here one insult, the she-devil metaphor, sets all in motion: “You are a bad mother, a worse wife, and a dreadful cook. In fact I don’t think you are a woman at all. I think that what you are is a she-devil!” (47). This ideologically prompted curse shocks Ruth into cold clarity: “So. I see. I thought I was a good wife tried temporarily and understandably beyond endurance, but no.” Bobbo’s curse catalyzes Ruth’s ironically expressed rage as a will to power, in which words effect metamorphosis: “If you are a she-devil, the mind clears at once. The spirits rise. There is no shame, no guilt, no dreary striving to be good. There is only . . . what you want” (48). Faust-like, Ruth exchanges all the traditionally feminine social conventions for a powerful new identity. By novel’s end, the unacceptably tall, clumsy, ugly Ruth has sacrificed herself to beauty in a grotesque, excruciating metamorphosis—becoming an ideologically constructed, commodified package of womanhood. This metafictional, decentered tale of wifely envy and revenge both attracts and repulses readers because Ruth smugly enjoys her new, dehumanized status.

Central to the structure and themes in She-Devil is interrogation and structural reversal of the romance novel. The New York Times has designated Weldon “the quintessential anti-romance novelist.” According to popular culture critic Jeanne Dubino, for the sake of profit romance novels recreate the heightened state called “falling in love”
and reinforce a cultural mandate that women must validate their existence through courtship leading to marriage. Additionally, the romance novel’s subtext suggests that women should not trust their own perceptions of reality. Carolyn Heilbrun adds to this construct that courtship offers women a “brief period in the limelight—and it is the part of their lives most constantly and vividly enacted in a myriad of representation—to encourage the acceptance of a lifetime of marginality . . .” (Writing 21). In the first paragraph of She-Devil, Ruth criticizes “Mary Fisher . . . [who] writes a great deal about the nature of love. She tells lies. [ . . . ] She is a writer of romantic fiction. She tells lies to herself, and to the world” (1). Mary Fisher’s “life personifies the romance fiction narrative, and her career the romance fiction industry” (Dubino 111). Indeed, Ruth asks, “Who needs a knight in shining armor when Bobbo is there . . . and full of adoration, admiration? Mary Fisher has made her books come true” (73-4). But in this novel, Weldon warns that “[s]afety and closure, which have always been held out to women as the ideals of female destiny, are not places of adventure, or experience, or life” (Heilburn, Writing 20).

As Gilbert and Gubar observe in Madwoman in the Attic, “Trapped in so many ways in the architecture—both the houses and the institutions of patriarchy, women . . . expressed their claustrophobic rage by enacting rebellious escapes” (85). In Jane Eyre, Rebecca by Daphne DuMaurier, and some other romance novels, the family mansion is destroyed by a climactic fire set by an angry woman—not the protagonist—supposed to be mad. Barreca observes that Weldon turns the world of the romance novel upside down to prove that the world has no rightful position at all. In She-Devil, the fire is an inciting incident of purification, freeing Ruth from the false Eden of Eden Grove estate.
Ruth then begins a purposeful, episodic quest for revenge and “power over the hearts and pockets of men” (26). Unlike Jane Eyre’s debilitating flight from bigamous Rochester, Ruth’s flight empowers her. With an allusion to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Ruth embraces feminist rebellion: “She laughed and said she was taking up arms against God Himself. Lucifer had tried and failed, but he was male. She thought she might do better, being female” (94).

In *Jane Eyre* the protagonist struggles for self-regulation in accord with prevailing social ideologies in order to gain a place in the world. The process is reductive: Jane Eyre is dwarfed by all around her—Mrs. Reed’s home and its inhabitants, Lowood School, Rochester’s horse, Thornfield Hall, and St. John Rivers’ religiosity. Ruth, on the contrary, dwarfs all around her: Bobbo measures five-feet, ten-inches tall; Ruth, six-feet, two-inches. In a home “designed for altogether smaller occupants,” Ruth “[knocked] her head against the oak beam over the fireplace” (17). Ruth’s attempts at feminine skills, propriety, and self-effacement only exacerbate the feeling of being “trapped in my body” (3). Cruel reactions to Ruth’s physiology wipe the beauty from her inner being. She gives up the fairy tale marriage plot, waiting for “a knight in shining armor [to] see through to the beauty of the soul, and gather the damsel up and set a crown on her head . . .” (63). When another female character tells her, “God places us in the world for a purpose,” Ruth replies, “His ways are far too mysterious . . . for me to put up with them anymore” (168). Ruth reasons, “I have tried many ways of fitting myself to my original body, and the world into which I was born, and have failed. I am no revolutionary. Since I cannot change the world, I will change myself” (237). Unacceptable to mass culture’s
image of woman, Ruth inflicts the violence of medical science to her body in order to avail herself of affirmation by the male gaze.

Weldon plots Ruth’s vengeful actions partially as a trickster she-devil to ensure that Mary Fisher experiences the real-world complications that follow romantic commitment. As Ruth gains money, power, and confidence, Mary loses them along with her health and finally her life. Ruth metamorphoses into her own enemy, whose actions she has mostly forgiven: “I can . . . forgive Mary Fisher for many things. [. . .] I daresay I might have done the same myself, had I stood in her little size 4 shoes. [. . .] [But] it is not just for myself that I look for vengeance” (210). Because Mary Fisher has become wealthy by misleading women about romantic and marital love, Ruth cannot “forgive her novels” (211). Weldon reduces Mary Fisher to writing frantically, desperately to support Bobbo’s defense, his children, and her mother; but even after punishing her so severely, Ruth asserts, “her lies are worse because now she knows they are lies” (210).

Weldon posits that women can exploit the invisibility and marginality by infiltrating, controlling, and manipulating society’s institutions through a sort of urban, pink-collar guerilla warfare. In a series of episodes, and by using various identities, Ruth manipulates the insurance industry, an elder care institution, a hospital for the criminally insane, the financial industry, housewives who want to work outside the home, the judiciary and penal system, and the church. In Chapter 29 of the British version of She-Devil, published by Hodder & Stoughton, Ruth joins a separatist-feminist commune of “wimmin” in order to lose weight for surgery.32 Strong, competent, unaffected Ruth fits

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32 American publishers elided the Hodder & Stoughton Chapter 29, according to Weldon, “for fear of annoying the readers and losing sales . . .” (Fay Weldon Discussion Group, 11 Jan. 2001).
into the hard-working commune as she has never fit in anywhere else. The wimmin’s good cheer tempts Ruth to remain, but “she wished to live in the giddy mainstream of the world, not tucked away in this muddy corner of integrity” (Hodder & Stoughton 200). Once Ruth has lost the requisite 40 pounds working in the commune garden and eating the monkish fare, she leaves the commune, for “she knew . . . that the best looking would suffer least, and the worst looking most, [t]here as anywhere” (Hodder & Stoughton 204). The publication industry Ruth simply dismisses by refusing to publish a novel written in Mary Fisher’s style: “Enough to know I can do it, if I want” (278). As a byproduct of all these episodes, Ruth, like Mary Poppins, has improved the lives of many, while in the process becoming an exceedingly wealthy woman.

To this point, She-Devil has been darkly comic because Ruth has manipulated from a position of weakness and readers comfortably root for the underdog. But, as critics have observed of Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice, the novel’s structure breaks in two; or as Wilde puts it, the ethical grid shifts, the final depravity pulling the literary rug from under readers’ feet. Dealing with the commercial medical establishment, Ruth assumes a powerful position bestowed by clever manipulation of the capitalist economy. She can unreasonably insist that surgeons transform her into the bodily image of Mary Fisher because she pays in cash. Her actions about-face from sadism to masochism. Ruth suffers to be perceived as beautiful. In a Christian motif, Weldon presents Ruth’s suffering as a reverse sacrifice: “Perhaps as Jesus did . . . for men, so I will do . . . for women. . . . I bring suffering and self-knowledge (the two go together) for others and salvation for myself . . .” (192).
In *She-Devil*, Weldon explores the reproductive intersection of certain cultural constructs: heredity, biology and physiology, medicine, psychology, and technology. Through Ruth’s melodramatic transformation, Weldon presents a decentered debate on the violence women undergo in order to reproduce mass culture’s approved image of womanhood. She illustrates the disconnect between the ideological image of womanhood and individuated flesh-and-blood woman. Ruth transforms herself into a commodified package of womanhood, with “features . . . so regular and so perfect they are hard to remember. She is all women because she is no woman” (186). Weldon has taken Barreca’s metaphor-into-narrative to extremes, writing on Ruth’s body a powerful metafiction based on the “cultural lies about [women’s] well-being” (Doody 47). Ruth admits, “Somehow it is not a matter of male or female, after all; it never was: merely of power (277). To readers, Ruth’s power seems to have cost too much, but many feminists have cited the irony in criticizing women who acquire power, but not the men who have always had it.

As Dubrow generally suggests is possible, the metafictional *She-Devil* issues certain condemnatory statements about the romance novel form. With publication of the next novel under consideration, *The Bulgari Connection*, Weldon issues several statements about her art—the conditions of production and reception of the novel—and art in general.

*The Bulgari Connection: A Brouhaha*

For the *New York Times* Finance section, John Tagliabue reports that “the deal [to write the commissioned novel] obliged Weldon to mention Bulgari, . . . known for bold and very expensive gold designs, at least 12 times, in a positive way” (13). Once the
novel was written, Bulgari produced a limited edition of 750 copies to be given as upscale party favors to favored clients celebrating the store’s opening. The books were “individually numbered, beautifully produced and bound,” and in September 2000, “boxed in a black wooden case with a scarlet ribbon” and laid by each place setting at a gala dinner at Claridge’s. “Too many copies were left behind amongst the debris of the celebration for comfort,” Weldon laments. She further notes that the press made only “brief mentions on the day of its initial limited edition” (original). But Tagliabue asserts that *The Bulgari Connection* “smash[es] the barrier between art and commerce.” Indeed, it does so twice, through it conditions of production and through its substance.

Weldon and her agent were so delighted with the finished novel that they decided to give it to publishers to read. The publishers, Grove/Atlantic, were also delighted and wanted to publish both in Britain and the United States. Changing the title and the name Bulgari was discussed, but “that seemed invidious” to Weldon: “The text had been written, as it were, to Bulgari, as to an essay title” (16 Oct. 2001). From a European book tour for *Rhode Island Blues* (2000), she returned to a media furor over publishing the commissioned novel on the open market but felt complimented that “the mere idea of it could generate so much energy” (original).

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33 The furor and outrage sparked by news of the commissioned novel’s imminent publication took place prior to its open-market availability; such a preemptory brouhaha about the novel’s genesis ironically elaborates on its exploration of ideology surrounding the media, wealth, art, and capitalism. Further irony may be found in the publication of Weldon’s response. For the *Sunday Telegraph*, she submitted an article responding to her literary name being “mud, in serious quarters.” The *Telegraph* editors were not satisfied with her first attempt, so she revised the article to be as they requested “more jokey & populist” (16 Oct. 2001). With an explanation, Weldon later posted both articles on the Fay Weldon Discussion Group. The original draft and the revised article published by the *Sunday Telegraph* are quoted in this section. The original draft will be parenthetically documented as “(original)” and the revised, published article as “(revised).” Both may be accessed on the Fay Weldon Discussion Group. <http://redmond.com/weldon/discuss.html>.
So, all unaware, according to the occasionally disingenuous Weldon, this literary iconoclast and innovator challenged the ideology of literature by publishing a commissioned, limited-edition novel in the literary marketplace. In early September 2001, with *The Bulgari Connection* not scheduled for release until November, it became news for broadsheets, the *New York Times* front page, CNN, the *Economist, Boston Globe* columnist Ellen Goodman, and others. On August 9, online literary columnist and independent publisher Dennis Loy Johnson equates the number of Bulgari references in the novel to the generosity of the commission. He accuses Weldon of the basest commercialism—initiating a standard practice of hiding advertisements in books. Further, Johnson attributes Weldon’s motivation to “revenge against a literary community that hadn’t given her the awards she felt she deserved.” Johnson’s comment seems justified. In a *New York Times* front-page article, David D. Kirkpatrick quotes Weldon’s true-to-form response to the commission offer: “When the approach came through I thought, ‘Oh no, dear, me, I am a literary author. . . . [M]y name will be mud forever.’ But then after a while I thought, ‘I don’t care. Let it be mud. They never give me the Booker prize anyway’” (A12). In fact, Grove/Atlantic publishers did hesitate to publish *The Bulgari Connection*, not wanting even to read a novel connected overtly to a specific product. However, a Grove/Atlantic spokesperson told Kirkpatrick, “We definitely questioned it. Then we read it and we loved it” (A12).

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34 It seems obvious that, in spite of this back-story of innocence, there is more to be known about the business negotiation. Did Weldon or her business manager have the foresight to retain the rights to the manuscript? Or did Bulgari retain some royalty rights in the event of publication on the open market?

35 From Kirkpatrick’s description of Weldon’s œuvre, it seems unlikely that he has read any of her other works: “Ms. Weldon customarily writes contemplative, literary novels about working women or intellectuals.”
On September 9, 2001, the Times published letters in response to Kirkpatrick’s article, one from Murray J. Gross, President of the Finnegans Wake Society of New York. Gross defends Weldon and product placement as part of a literary tradition shared by James Joyce, “a most uncommercial author,” who mentions the Guinness brewery often in both Ulysses and Finnegans Wake without any “record that he ever got even a glass of the brew for his trouble.” Gross dismisses Weldon’s motive for the frequent Bulgari name dropping: “[W]hat matters is how good the book is. Let us await Fay Weldon’s latest with a more open mind than that which greeted Ulysses” (18).

Ellen Goodman, a Weldon reader, casts Weldon’s motive as more “mischievous than mercenary.” Certainly, given Weldon’s iconoclastic position her claim of naïveté is difficult to credit. Goodman, however, assumes that Weldon has accepted product placement into literature as it is practiced in film: for an E.T. Halloween scene’s realism, for instance, a Hansel-and-Gretel-like trail of candy is needed. Mars, Incorporated turns down placement of M&M’s, but Reese’s Pieces profits hugely by purchasing the product placement. Prematurely and inaccurately, Goodman writes that Weldon “liberally sprinkled the crown jewels of her patron into a thriller and named it The Bulgari Connection” (11). Goodman’s column ran on September 11, 2001. Thereafter, “the real headlines hit [and] such matters became trivial . . .” Weldon observes (16 Oct. 2001). Reviewer Katherine A. Powers summarizes the pre-publication debate surrounding the novel as the expellation of “a mighty eructation of literary high-mindedness” eclipsed completely on September 11, 2001, to events “genuinely evil.”

Ironically, The Bulgari Connection explores the integral, complex, interdependent relationships among the art world, the financial and commercial world, and the mass
media. Comparing the process of writing *The Bulgari Connection* to painting a commissioned portrait, Weldon defines its theme: “devouring its own tail . . . turned out to be the theme of the novel: the painting of a portrait, the way the truth keeps breaking through: the relationship of art to commerce” (original). The novel’s parallel plots concern a wealthy, going-on-59, self-made businessman, Barley Salt, who leaves his dull, dowdy wife Grace for the gorgeous young Doris Dubois, the star of her own television program *Artsworld Extra*. Walter Winston Wells, a talent painter in his twenties, becomes Grace’s lover.

In *The Bulgari Connection*, Weldon no longer laments phallologocentrism as in her earlier novels, but the replacement of words by images in the interest of political correctness. Walter has chosen to become an artist rather than a poet because “the image paid better than words in the new century. . . . So he had been practical and gone to art college, only to find the artist was as likely to live in a garret as the poet, unless he was very lucky” (18). At a charity auction the bidding for Lady Juliet’s portrait begins at £8,000 and increases by £200 increments, partially because Walter has addressed the party, as instructed by Lady Juliet, on the way art could serve humanity, and “the morality of aesthetics.” She advises Walter, who is unused to public speaking, “Be altogether as languid and beautiful as you can . . . and prices will triple” because “[h]ow you look is more important than what you say” (21, 25).

Moreover, *The Bulgari Connection* illustrates business dealings between artists and patrons or galleries, and by extension between writers and publishers, and other kinds of artists. Weldon writes no doubt from experience: Ron Weldon’s career as a painter, Nick Fox’s as a poet, and over forty years of her own personal and professional
associations within the art world, the media, and the business world. Walter has received £1,800 for painting Lady Juliet’s portrait in which she wears Bulgari jewelry—a necklace and matching earrings. Walter’s compensation for the portrait “worked out at £300 a week for six weeks work” (21). However, Walter has actually painted two portraits, the first for Lady Juliet to keep, the second to serve as his charitable contribution to the auction, painted without reimbursement, even for canvas or paint (19). In this, high culture is portrayed as exploitive.

In the novel, Walter’s paintings bring between £500 and £900. His gallery, the “small and unfashionable Bloomsday,” takes 60%. The gallery owners “put VAT on the selling price including commission, so Walter has to pay more than his fair share” (61). When the Bloomsday sells four landscapes to the director of the Manhatt. [sic] Centre for the Arts in New York, Walter is subsequently invited to have a one-artist exhibition there. Although he and Grace revel in his discovery by the art world, Walter also knows that the Manhatt. may be responding to dictates of available space, since they normally specialize in “art installations, unmade beds as art objects and so on” (77). Furthermore, the contract percentages for the exhibition will likely be the following: 50% for the Manhatt. of the wall price; 15% for Walter’s agent; 25% to 40% for Inland Revenue, depending on the quantity of paintings sold; and finally, a small cut for the Bloomsday. In this market riches come to artists only at prices of £10,000 or more per painting (130). But the exhibition sells out and the Mahhatt. requests another six early paintings. These Walter fakes, reproducing his own early style. He finds the process “fascinating” but the style “puerile” (163).
Weldon interrogates truisms about artists. In one incident, Lady Juliet expresses envy of artists living “snug in your garrets, safe from the world” (19). Sir Ronald Random fears a theft of Lady Juliet’s jewelry during the portrait sittings, but she asserts that “[Walter] was an artist, everyone knew artists were above material things” (20). Walter complains to Grace, “I compromised [my artistic integrity and reputation] when I accepted this commission in the first place. . . . What painter in his right mind takes on this kind of duff job?” She replies, “Goya.” Grace relates how when the Duke of Wellington arrived victorious at the city gates of Madrid, Goya painted the Duke’s head over the body of Napoleon’s brother, Joseph Bonaparte of Spain. Goya sold the portrait to the Duke. Walter, and likely Weldon, thinks, “When a new patron beats upon the gates, it is wisest for artists to express their enthusiasm, and there is honour in the custom. Integrity is what you can afford” (129).

A sub-plot explores the intersection of literature, media rush to judgment, and fickle mass audiences. Motivated by sexual and professional jealousy, Doris Dubois impulsively fires Flora, the knowledgeable, prescient research assistant on her highly respected program Artsworld Extra. Famous for being spot-on in the art world, Doris supports an author named Leadbetter for the Turner literature prize. Flora correctly predicts that “the public have gone right off all [Leadbetter’s] Culture of Disgust stuff. The critics will follow like lambs. There’s going to be a seismic shift and Doris will have three whole programmes in the can about yuck art” (134). Doris has erred. Fed up with her power plays, the program’s producers take advantage of her error in judgment to rid themselves of her, holding a crucial meeting in Doris’s absence. On the basis of her program being “too expensive per head of viewer” with the quality-weighting covertly
removed, Artsworld Extra is cancelled and Doris loses her prestigious starring role (178). To add insult to injury, the high culture Artsworld Extra is replaced by a popular culture program that appeals to a wider audience, From the Other Side, which exploits Flora’s gifts to explore the supernatural.

As for the Bulgari firm in the novel, Weldon praises its décor, knowledge, artisanship, dignity, and discretion but only in brief scenes restricted to jewelry purchase by Barley Salt and Doris Dubois. The jewelry itself functions as a symbolic nexus—“a miraculous object, like a Byzantine icon”—connecting characters, plots, and themes. Reminiscent of certain distinctions made by F. Scott Fitzgerald in The Great Gatsby, Bulgari jewelry defines differences between the very rich and the social climbers who scrabble greedily but can only mimic the truly wealthy.

In articles for the Telegraph, Weldon justifies the genesis of The Bulgari Connection. She counters accusations of abetting capitalism in its co-opting by pointing out that critics had been misinformed and indeed, could not even have read the work they were criticizing. She protests also the media rush to judgment in order to sell itself and hedges in favor of the novel on the grounds that the open-market edition would be judged by reviewers for whom it was not written. Comparing The Bulgari Connection to commissioned portraits, sponsored productions of plays, and Truman Capote’s Breakfast at Tiffany’s, Weldon differentiates product placement from sponsorship: “It is not a completed novel into which product names have been blithely dropped in return for a fee” (revised). “It was if anything a sponsored novel, and barely even that” (original). According to the contract, beyond mentioning Bulgari a dozen times and in no way disparaging the firm, there was no editorial control. Weldon refers to her career-
beginning realization that if an advertisement is “a little story selling a product . . . [then] a novel or a play was a longer story selling an idea.” So she views the commission as an opportunity for professional liberation by allowing her to “drive into the skid and do both” (original). In the composition process then, Weldon was left “free of the opinions of publishers, critics and reviewers and the expectations of readers” (revised). She also cites release “from the usual weight of ‘literature;’ which I began to see hung like an albatross round my neck . . .” (16 Oct. 2001). When Weldon found she would be required to mention Bulgari at least a dozen times, she thought, “[T]his is absurd. . . . Let’s do it honorably—without any pretence” (qtd. in Kirkpatrick A12). Comparing production of The Bulgari Connection to human reproduction, Weldon terms it “[a]n in-vitro birth rather than a normal birth, but a baby all the same, alive and kicking splendidly” (revised).

Overall, Weldon argues that those who think of “the interior of books as inviolable,” as artistically sacred, disingenuously ignore the commercial aspects of writing and publishing literature (Johnson). Weldon pointedly analyzes conditions in the contemporary publishing industry, echoing the 1984 Letters to Alice: “these days there is a Literary Industry much as there is an Agro Industry: the former being to reading as the latter is to farming . . .” (34). The gentlemanly publishing house has become a media conglomerate whose officers and stockholders concern themselves with the profitable publications—nonfiction, thrillers, and romances. Publishers “are increasingly unwilling to publish ‘good’ books because they can’t make sufficient profit on them” (16 Oct. 2001). Good books are considered bestsellers if only 2,000 copies are purchased; novelists cannot subsist on the advance and a 10% net royalty of such sales. As Weldon
observes, “Literary novels gets [sic] the reviews but little else” (original). Fiction writers must supplement their income, preferably from commissions and contracts for other types of writing: adaptations, films, plays, television series, radio, short stories, forewords, reviews, journalism, speeches, and even charity leaflets. It seems paradoxical then to bemoan commodification of fiction when readers do not nurture “the pure literature they like to feel exists, but so seldom read” (original).

According to Weldon, writers know all too well what publishers will accept, that for all but the most distinguished novelists, they may suggest themes or insist on changing endings or settings with niche marketing in mind. However, one type of marketing may not determine another: although E.T. fans rushed to buy Reese’s Pieces, Weldon observes that her readers are unlikely to rush to Bulgari to purchase jewelry at prices of £275,000 like Sir Roderick Random—or even £18,000 like Barley Salt. To those who termed the book “tacky” for deleting the line between literature and advertising, Weldon responded, “Have I betrayed the sacred name of literature? Well, what the heck” (qtd. in Goodman, 11).

But able for once to lay aside the profit factor that “exercises so much pressure, both covert, and overt,” Weldon is pleased with The Bulgari Connection, which “took off and all but wrote itself” (original and revised). Eschewing modesty, she accurately describes the novel as a “brief elegant work,” but whether it is “as near perfect as any I had ever done” (original and revised) needs more exploration than can be attempted here. Weldon describes the contract process for The Bulgari Connection as laborious because “there had been nothing quite like it before, nor is there likely to be again” (revised). Unconcerned with consistency, Weldon also takes the offensive against mass and high
culture by predicting a positive future for “good” sponsored novels: “There are no rules. If it pays the author’s rent and enables him to live to write another day, good” (revised). “If writers or novels can find sponsors—as it happens a lot in theatre—then good, and it may be the way ahead. But I don’t see it happening much” (16 Oct. 2001). Echoing Aphra Behn and George Eliot, Weldon insists that a novel must be judged only according to merit, not by its genesis.

**Conclusion**

The narrative strategy Weldon employs to explore women’s construction and identity harkens back to an early and ongoing mode of writing for a female audience—the didactic, used simultaneously to confine and liberate. However, Weldon’s works are widely removed from early conduct books, for Weldon is no literary Grace Poole, confining the wild woman to the attic. In popular and best-selling novels, Weldon both participates in and satirizes the commodification of language to interrogate not only the construction of womanhood but also the educative or didactic purposes of much traditional women’s literature.

Weldon prevents readers from taking advice from her cautionary tales by constructing each as a less-than-blended cauldron of voices, contradictions, whirling situations, wild coincidences, legends, old wives’ tales, and women’s wisdom—and reminding readers through certain narrative strategies, including shifting points of view and authorial intrusions, that they are reading a construct. Her pacing, outrageous voicings, shifting points-of-view, ironic authorial intrusions, and page layouts—all are designed to repeatedly remind the reader, “You’re reading a novel, don’t forget!”
Weldon’s stories have no overt moral; in fact, they seem to lack a moral center. They are, however, purposeful: Weldon attempts to move women to the threshold of independence through humor, grotesquerie, and the bewilderment that can give rise to thinking in a new way. Thus, it might be said that Weldon’s metafiction is metadidactic. Through her narrative strategies, Weldon aims to startle women out of their torpor, into realization and resistance of the commodified roles they are pressured to reproduce in their lives.
Afterword

The placement of Fay Weldon’s literary oeuvre as a British woman of letters must remain incomplete for, in 2007, she continues to write copiously. Weldon compares writing to breathing—“simply a natural thing that I do” (qtd. in Rountree 98). Not quite facetiously, I suspect that Weldon’s writing will cease only with her last breath. If her life span approximates her mother’s, she has before her twenty years of her career. Margaret Birkinshaw died at ninety-five, able to recall the poetry she had recited to Jane and Fay on long walks in New Zealand. Since Weldon’s fictions have obliquely reflected her personal life, we may expect to read about the issues of society’s elders. In fact, Weldon has already begun to revise her previous pronouncements, now believed to be mistaken; in the future, she will probably produce pungent commentary on cultural developments and ironic fictional advice for young and old. She may also fictionalize the spiritual path elders often take as she recently converted to Anglicanism from atheism. Although Weldon is unlikely to end her life alone and poor, health problems are nearly inevitable: in 2005, she had a near-death experience when, because of an allergic reaction, her heart stopped. She saw a vision of the gates of paradise—vulgar, middle class, and double glazed (Jeffries). Since Weldon has written throughout her career of what currently interested or obsessed her, she will likely continue the social commentary on women’s lives into the early twenty-first century.
From the ideology of womanhood as discussed in Chapter 1, Weldon peels away chastity, modesty, and silence (including silence about the appalling possibility that normal women act polygamously from libido). Too, Weldon writes from a powerful offensive position, for she screeches, to some, in rage; she portrays women who act out from anger—*not* internalizing it and thereby projecting upon themselves the responsibility for injustices perpetrated upon them.

As Weldon’s perceptions of life changed, the focus of her novels changed as well. Characters shifted from mother-blaming, man-blaming, and from putting women in charge so that all would be well, to increased interest in the institutionalized constructs of mass culture—science, medicine, economics, religion, politics, feminism, business, the judiciary, the welfare system, and so on. Eder criticizes *Auto da Fay* as a too-familiar memoir because “so much of its material shows up as roots for her novels.” But that Weldon has constructed fictions out of her ongoing interests and obsessions, the stuff of her life, enhances her literary production, for those interests and obsessions are types for women’s experiences of life. In *Female Friends*, Weldon explored the effects of mothering on daughters and of women’s special physiologies on their lives: the menarche, pregnancy, abortion, birth, and menopause. She calls attention to the fact that what adults are given medals for doing to one another during wars, women are jailed for doing to a fetus or an imperfect baby. Before the Women’s Movement declared sisterhood among women, Weldon recorded their fierce rivalry for male attention and marriage in *The Fat Woman’s Joke*. She began her novels with the rocky marriages, adulterous relationships, single women, and divorcées that succeeded the romance novel’s climax of acknowledged courtship and denouement of wedding and happy-ever-
after. In *Down Among the Women*, Weldon portrayed how women can perceive themselves in terms of their husband’s accomplishments. In *Remember Me, The Rules of Life, The Hearts and Lives of Men, The Heart of the Country*, and *Affliction*, Weldon shows what may happen when women lose husbands to casual affairs, (younger) mistresses or second wives, and death. After thirty years of marriage, Ron Weldon left Fay for his mistress, via his therapist, and then died suddenly on the day their divorce became final. After the divorce and Ron’s death, Weldon married the poet Nick Fox, fifteen years her junior. Fictionally, Weldon posited what changes may happen to both partners when a woman of fifty-eight becomes the lover of a man of twenty-nine. And in *Rhode Island Blues*, she explored what it means to be an old woman near the end of life, yearning for love, companionship, activity, and excitement.

With publication of the short story collection *A Hard Time to be a Father* (1998), Weldon gave notice that “for a man to succeed within patriarchy he must rigidly adhere to the rules and laws of patriarchy, or else risk marginalization.” She contrasts women, who, “being exempt from patriarchy, are able to exploit the weaknesses that exist within it” (17 Jun. 2002). *Splitting*, for instance, is especially predicated on such exploitation. But as women entered a previously male domain, they began to see its problems. Men were victimized too by having to be “strong, heterosexual, successful, sole supporters of their families” (18 Jun. 2002). Weldon cites *Worst Fears* as matriarchal: “men tend to be the victims of the women. . . . My heroine does the earning . . . and keeps her husband as a kind of decorative optional extra” (18 Mar. 2001). Media blurbs show Weldon, as many crusading elders do, wondering whether in this case the masculinization of our
women, the feminization of our men, and the overall feminization of mass culture has
gone too far.

Space for critical work on Weldon abounds, especially with the publication rate
she continues into her eighth decade. One suggestion for further study is this shift from
nearly exclusive attention on female to more attention on male characters, with all of
them read as negotiating through mass culture, the ergonarchy, and the administered life.
Weldon’s later novels are not survival manuals only for women but survival manuals
written against the reduction in vitality of human lives caused by oppressive cultural
practices in the age of mechanical reproduction. Other possibilities for study include
Glavin’s call to examine the Scottish Calvinistic and antinomian influences of Weldon’s
education at St. Andrews University, a period Weldon gives short shrift in her memoirs.
Because Weldon has to some extent theorized their effects, her tools of production, from
felt-tip pen to computer after the year 2000, would be a timely study of advancing
technology’s effect on literary production. In her novels, I have found occasional
resonances with Buddhist and Islamic approaches to life’s exigencies and suffering.
These resonances and certain Christian motifs, especially Weldon’s 1998 introduction to
a discrete publication of Paul’s Epistles to the Corinthians would twine interestingly with
Weldon’s recent conversion from atheism to Christianity. Especially fruitful areas of
study will be those across her oeuvre, of magic realism, fantasy, science fiction,
intertextualities of various kinds (including popular forms), and polyphonic voicings
(ironic and shifting points of view, authorial intrusions), among others. Finally, critic P.J.
Smith observes that Weldon chronicles the change in women’s culture “from shrewish
rivalry to sisters” (126). I extend Smith’s observation in suggesting a Foucauldian
alternative history of women’s culture and women in culture from circa 1930 to the present, and beyond.

Although literature is subject to fads and trends, my hope for Weldon’s extensive oeuvre, albeit incomplete, is that it join the British humorous and satirical tradition of writers who have lightened moral exploration with laughter: among others, Aphra Behn, Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, Jane Austen, Lewis Carroll, Oscar Wilde, P.G. Wodehouse, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Evelyn Waugh, Muriel Spark, and Kingsley Amis.\(^\text{36}\)

Perhaps then her work, and that of other women writers, will not encounter the cultural obstacles described in Chapter 1, in which each work by a woman is received as if it emerges, without context of past or present, from a vacuum. With gender-integrated placement, Weldon’s work will less likely suffer truncations similar those suffered by the ever-incipient tradition of literature by women.

In this way, although Weldon views as outdated some of her depictions of social relations, when—not if—the administered life goes awry for women of the future, they may look to her work for constructs of frivolity and toughness in the face of hazardous, unpredictable life. Partially from a desperate early life that might have crushed her nascent creativity, Weldon constructs picaras who manage both to endure and enjoy life. They avoid the bourgeois sadness that Glavin points to as a dominant feature of recent literary protagonists. Weldon’s women do not internalize the whiny, self-absorbed attitude fostered, and even cultivated, by capitalistic mass culture and the administered life: “This [terrible thing] isn’t supposed to happen to me!” Weldon gives “her fictional women permission for all kinds of riotous or ruinous behavior, but not one ounce of tea

\(^\text{36}\) To her British peers might be added the French peers of Rabelais, Molière, and La Rochefoucauld.
or sympathy for incompetence, complicity with chauvinists, or passivity about sexism” (Pearlman 85). If Weldon’s women are damaged, it is not from fear of suffering but from suffering itself, and only temporarily.

Having trained in New Criticism and having a certain habit of mind, I detest what I perceive to be textual misreadings. However, I do take the point of critics who privilege theoretical readings, for instance, over close readings: the accretion of narrative style can effect perceptual alterations in the reader. Barreca describes Weldon’s first American reading, from the recently published *The President’s Child* (1983), in a way that the texts function for me: “She did not so much read *with* emotion as she read in such a way that her listeners were themselves filled with feeling” (*Wicked Fictions* 2). My worldview has brightened through Weldon’s print “orality.” I have perceived and dis-internalized some ideologies because she uses language not as “voiced” by writers, but as “heard” by readers. To me, her fictions say, “Leave me, leave the world of the novel—go and live, refusing to be bound by fear.”


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