

VISUAL TRANSGRESSION AND THE FEMALE GAZE: THE SECRET OF MARY REILLY

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*To perform the terms of the production of
woman as text, as image, is to resist
identification with that image.*

Tesesa di Lauretis

Mary Reilly, a 1995 production directed by Stephen Friar and based on the novel of the same name by Valerie Martin, is not the only female filmic version of the classic nineteenth-century novel, *the Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), by Robert Louis Stevenson. The 1971 English production of *Doctor Jekyll and Sister Hyde* and the more recent comic version of *Dr. Jekyll and Ms. Hyde* (1996) both attempts to shift the emphasis of the story to a female protagonist who embodies the evil personality of the original Mr. Hyde. Not trying to disclaim the feminist critique of the implications of such portrayals, I would like, however, to focus on *Mary Reilly*, which, in a sense, differs radically from these versions in

that it presents a female protagonist who is supposed to play the role of the bearer of the look, the agency that replaces the position of the male narrator, the element that comes to the scene to occupy an empty space of female representation in the original story. The title itself points to a shift in the reading process from a masculine dichotomous world from which women are excluded (*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*) to the insertion of a feminine character who apparently assumes the control of the narrative and, thus, determines the focus of the story. This is the first impression the viewers have as they glance at the advertising poster and cover of the video and connect it with the nicely written name of the protagonist in the foreground.

However, the “secret of Mary Reilly,” as the Brazilian title announces, and “the untold story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,” as the subtitle of the book emphasizes, I would contend, work to reinforce and endorse, rather than question or transgress, the original male narrative. As the viewers unveil the not so well-kept secret of Mary Reilly, the narrative assumes the value of a mere reproduction of the ideology that shaped the original story. Therefore, the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde from a feminine perspective remains erased and untold, and the female voice silenced as Mary Reilly becomes, throughout the narrative, a simulacrum of the role of women in the nineteenth-century patriarchal society. I claim that, in the end, *Mary Reilly* cannot escape the sexist stereotyping of women that predominates in mainstream film industry, especially in Hollywood movies, in which woman’s representation serves mostly to establish sexual difference in cultural and ideological terms.

At first glance, *Mary Reilly*, as the apparent protagonist and subject of the story, seems to enact what Laura Mulvey terms “the dramatic double bind” which awaits the woman central character in that “she is unable to achieve a stable sexual identity, torn between the deep blue sea of passive femininity and the devil of repressive masculinity” (“Afterthoughts” 31). In fact, Mary’s oscillation and her inability to achieve a stable sexual identity, as evoked by Freud’s theory of femininity, would leave her “shifting between the metaphoric opposition ‘active’ and ‘passive’” (“Afterthoughts” 31).

In *Mary Reilly* the generic space seems to shift by the introduction of a woman whose position is central to the story, and the outcome, triggered by this oscillation between ‘passive femininity’ and ‘regressive masculinity’, is the protagonist’s split between these two conflicting desires. Furthermore, the film enacts the Oedipal scene in relation to feminine sexuality in which the girl’s dramatic dissociation from the mother is engendered by her difficulty in switching her sexual drive from a woman (the mother) to a man (first the father, and then a partner in a heterosexual relationship). As this move is quite radical, the girl cannot entirely identify with the opposite sex nor with the Law of the Father—thus women’s natural exclusion from the symbolic.

Mary Reilly’s oscillation between ‘passive femininity’ and ‘regressive masculinity’ is derived from her childhood, as shown throughout the film in the roles of her aggressive and abusive father and her passive and silent

mother. The abuses she receives from her father as a child have left not only the scars she carries on her body, but also the marks in her unconscious attested by her frequent nightmares. She later admits to Dr. Jekyll that she is “afraid of herself”, that is, she dreads her troublesome identification with her father in the sense that she might be led to be attracted by his behaviour and act as he did. On the other hand, the image of her dead mother in the film, the image with which Mary is supposed to identify, is one of utter passivity, victimization, sublimation and silence. Mary becomes, then, from childhood, torn between these two conflicting impulses: male aggression and sensuality to which she feels both attracted and repulsed, and female passivity and sublimation with which she is expected to comply.

Likewise, Mary Reilly’s position in the story between the benevolent, torn law-abiding Dr. Jekyll and the sensuous and violent Mr. Hyde, echoes her childhood drama of sexual ambivalence and conflict. Dr. Jekyll represents the “correct” path for Mary’s femininity through the repression of her sexual desire as he personifies the authority of the law embodied by his title and social position and sees in Mary, as her name symbolically suggests, the “angel in the house”, the only person he can trust, the submissive woman who helps and supports him when he is in trouble, who provides a perfect home to which he can return after his transformation, and who stands for sensibility and nature. In the film, Mary’s role as an idealized nineteenth-century woman is represented mainly through her ability to cultivate a garden in the most sterile and inhospitable environment, thus, evoking her stereotypical position of mother and nurturer, romantically connected to nature.

Mr. Hyde, on the other hand, depicts the dark and evil side associated with violence and, above all, sensuality to which Mary is irresistibly drawn (“he troubles me”). Contrary to Dr. Jekyll who represents the law, Mr. Hyde, as an “outlaw” and an “outcast”, acts on Mary’s latent sexuality and her natural “outlawry” as a woman excluded from the symbolic. He constantly reminds her of her ambivalent feelings towards her father and of his own identification with him. He also hints that Mary, somehow, liked what her father did to her, thus making explicit the mechanism of sexual attraction, sublimation, and confrontation that Mary undergoes. The conflict of desire that Mary experiences is evoked in a nightmare she has in which Mr. Hyde is seducing her in bed but facing her resistance, he affirms: “Sorry, I thought you had invited me here”, to which she, after a suggestive pause, hesitantly responds, “I did”.

The inability of resolution of this sexual drama is made explicit by the fact that these two conflictuous options reside in only one man, in the same way that they both fight a battle in Mary’s unconscious. As the metaphor employed in the film implies, the two ambivalent and dichotomous desires function as both the “knife and the wound”; it is the medicine and the poison, two opposite sides of the same coin—it is a conflictuous opposition without a chance for resolution. The inevitable and expected outcome is the death of Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde as proof that a reconciliation of these two extreme

dichotomous positions cannot be attained. As for Mary, to quote Mulvey, “the correct road, *femininity* leads to increasing repression of ‘the active’” (31), and for her to follow the path of a maid in the nineteenth-century, she has to give up sexual desire and embrace “femininity” as a cultural and, therefore, fictional construct.

The basis of this first reading relies on the fact that Mary Reilly may be viewed as a female character occupying the center of the narrative. I would argue, however, that in the course of the film, despite the viewers’ original impression that Mary is the agent in the story, she becomes a mere object upon which the gaze of the male character rests. In fact, she is introduced into the narrative to signify sexual difference and to be viewed as an erotic spectacle. Rather than inserting a female central character into an established male narrative to indicate the possibility of a feminine contextualization, *Mary Reilly*, on the contrary, culminates by producing a reification of the role of woman. As Teresa di Lauretis puts it: “the position of woman in language and in cinema is one of non-coherence; she finds herself only in a void of meaning, the empty space between the signs . . . a place not represented, not symbolized, and thus preempted to subject (or self) representation” (8). The viewers in *Mary Reilly* are presented with a female character who lacks subjectivity and who is not really the agent they are led to think she is, but rather an erotic object that embodies the representation of femininity inscribed in social and cultural constructs. As such Mary represents simultaneously a virtuous and an idealized female character, the erotic object of the male gaze, the image of the castrated woman, and also the bearer of guilt.

The objectification of the female image through the male gaze occurs throughout the film, but I would like to focus on two major instances. Firstly, at the outset of action when the camera shows Mary cleaning the floor and as the camera approaches, so does Dr. Jekyll who becomes the bearer of the look. The servile position of the maid who passively and fixedly scrubs the floor contrasts with the movement and gaze of the male protagonist who controls, not only the scene, but also the dialogue (“Don’t worry, I won’t bite”). The second episode occurs as Mary is in the library perusing a book in which Mr. Hyde has made some drawings that clearly enact the process of reification of the female body and, above all, the representation of woman as lack. The misogynist drawing of a mutilated female body is contrasted with the picture of a male body in which the male sexual organ is emphasized in a blatant reference to women’s castration. The objectification of the female character and body is further stressed by the viewers’ awareness that there is another gaze, besides Mary’s, upon the scene. Mary’s perusal of the book is framed by Mr. Hyde’s dominating and controlling gaze. As he approaches her, he grabs her body parts possessively in a clear reference to the depiction of the female body as an erotic object to be seduced and as a spectacle for the masculine audience. It is also interesting to notice how Mr. Hyde’s image has been fabricated to fit in the role of the irresistible

seducer who compels identification from the male viewer. In the original novel, Mr. Hyde is, conversely, portrayed as a deformed and evil looking man. Despite the limp he acquires to force his identification with Mary's father and with the image of the devil simultaneously, the prevalence of his glamorous and sensual depiction in the film works as a tool to cause a specific effect on the audience.

The character of Mary Reilly is also composed to form a direct contrast with Mrs. Farraday (Glenn Close from *Fatal Attraction*), the owner of the brothel in which Mr. Hyde carries out his experiments. While Mary represents the image of the angel in the house, Mrs. Farraday personifies the "monster" in a clear reproduction of the nineteenth-century binary logic for female representation. Obviously, Mrs. Farraday's fate is a brutal death at the hands of the monstrous Mr. Hyde, whereas Mary is the only person capable of placating his rage. This contrast is evident in the scene in which Mrs. Farraday is beheaded as Mary angelically waters the garden. In the end, Mary manages to control Mr. Hyde's impulse to murder her so that he "takes pity on Mary". However, he announces that he always knew that she would be the death of both of them (Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde). At this point Mary is granted another typical role for women: as bearer of guilt. In her role of the benevolent and selfless angel, Mary willingly assumes the role of an accomplice in the crimes of Mr. Hyde, as for example, when he breaks a cup and she takes the blame for him after he, like her father, has told her, "look what you have made me do".

In *Mary Reilly*, as in most mainstream films, the meaning of women is sexual difference, as Mulvey puts it ("Visual Pleasure" 21). Despite the apparent visual transgression and the focus on the female gaze as the bearer of the look by drawing attention to a female protagonist, the film culminates by articulating a traditional representation of woman as sexual difference and spectacle. In di Lauretis' words, "Represented as the negative term of sexual differentiation, spectacle-fetish or specular image, in any case obscene, woman is constituted as the ground of representation, the looking glass held up to man" (15). Here di Lauretis echoes Virginia Woolf's belief expressed in *A Room of One's Own* that women have traditionally been used by men as looking-glasses so that men could judge their superiority based upon what they perceived as the "visible" inferiority of women: "women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice his natural size" (36). In *Mary Reilly*, the scene in which a mirror reflects both Mary's and Dr. Jekyll's images serves to establish a contrast between the two: the agent and the subject. The woman functions simply as the means upon which man measures his superiority.

The "secret" of *Mary Reilly* is that the image of women in mainstream film industry is still fabricated for the manipulation of visual pleasure and the compliance of the rules of representation in a patriarchal society. In *Mary Reilly* the Manichaeism and binary logic which has pervaded the cultural

constructs predominate. Far from giving voice to female characters or presenting an innovative female gaze and narrative authority, the film actually reinforces the dichotomies to which women characters have been confined and preserves the male gaze which has dominated the film industry. The task of the feminist critic becomes, thus, to resist objectification by questioning the misreadings of our culture as, to quote Di Lauretis, “strategies of writing and reading are forms of cultural resistance” (7). In the final analysis, the only visual transgression and female gaze upon Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is my own.

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