“In the Gothic Mirror”: Reflections of Female Monstrosity in “The Long Arm”*

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Monsters are abound in the realm of the gothic. In the “gothic mirror,” notes Karen Stein, the self is often reflected in the extreme as “the rebel, the outcast, the obsessive seeker of forbidden knowledge, [and] the monster”; such deeds deemed heroic for men are regarded as “bizarre and crazy” when it comes to women (123). Because women who dare to transgress from the narrow confines of gender expectations have been figured as the monster, these monstrous beings tend to be more prominent in narratives about female experience, and as such, readers of the gothic often encounter women who are conflicted between a “socially acceptable, passive, congenial, ‘feminine’ self and a suppressed, monstrous hidden self” (123). Consequently, feminist critics have been inclined to regard the gothic as a female genre “written by, for, and about women” in order to explore “formerly unspeakable, ‘monstrous’ aspects of women’s lives (Stein 125); in this

* This work was supported by the Sungshin Women’s University Research Grant of 2019.
way, the gothic has served as “a useful site for feminist revisions of female identity and resistance to patriarchal power” (Goddu 94).

The Lizzie Borden murder case, one of the most infamous in American history, is steeped in gothic imagery. Louis Gross’ study of American gothic fiction refers to the biographies of Lizzie Borden as portrayals of a “truly Gothic American life” (94). And the woman whose name is affixed to this horrific crime continues to haunt the American imagination. What’s most striking about this case is that no other crime has spawned such a “remarkable body of creative work” (Schofield 91, italics mine); not only have generations of American children sung about this axe-wielding madwoman and her monstrous deed as a nursery rhyme, but Americans’ obsession for “Bordenalia” has kept Lizzie’s story alive in operas, a ballet performance, plays, a rock musical, several made-for-TV movies and motion picture films, documentaries, various popular songs, a handful of short stories and poems, and of course, in novels too many to count (Zakaria). It is apparent that there is (to quote Emily Dickinson) something “appalling” yet “exhilarating” and “captivating” about Lizzie and her story that

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1) In 1892, thirty-two year old Lizzie Borden of Fall River, Massachusetts was charged with murdering her father Andrew and her stepmother Abby by striking them multiple times with an axe. Eventually, she was found not guilty but despite her acquittal, Lizzie remained the prime suspect in the court of public opinion; rampant speculations and gossip ensued—ranging from physical and sexual abuse by her father, incest, feud over money to the discovery of a lesbian tryst between Lizzie and Bridget Sullivan, the family maid—but not a one was substantiated. Her older sister Emma had remained by Lizzie’s side during and after the trial but the two became estranged in 1905 due to Lizzie’s friendship with actress Nance O’Neil, with whom she is sometimes suspected of having a lesbian relationship. Until her death in 1927, Lizzie was ostracized by the Fall River society (Kent 327–29).
feeds the frenzy to tell and re-tell it time and again. And in its multiple re-tellings, it has, as Ann Schofield points out, taken on “the qualities of a popular American myth or legend that effectively links the present to the past” (91). Subsequently, one of the aims of this essay is to examine what lies at the core of this undying fascination with the Lizzie Borden story and why it so “resonates with the fundamental elements of American culture” (91).

For one, Deborah Allard, a lifelong resident of Fall River, Massachusetts and a staff reporter at the local Herald News submits that it is Lizzie’s gender which not only rendered her a media sensation at the time of the event but also ensured the cultural longevity of her narrative: “I think the case has gotten so much attention,” Allard says, “because our proper Victorian ancestors couldn’t fathom that . . . a woman from the upper class could commit such a heinous crime” (qtd. in Yuko). This sentiment is echoed by several others. S. Bradley Shaw asserts that the “macabre fascination with the double homicide seems to have been heightened because of the Borden’s class status and the gender of the prime suspect” (215). Lee-Ann Wilber, another resident of Fall Rivers and the manager of the Lizzie Borden Museum and Bed and Breakfast, also attributes the enduring appeal of the Borden murders to the fact that “the primary suspect was a woman and that the murder weapon was a hatchet, at the time when poison was the method of choice for most female Victorian killers” (Yuko).2) Also italicizing the “usefulness” of gender

2) The simplicity of Wilber’s comment clarify in part why Lizzie’s reflection upon the gothic mirror is usually that of a monster: an irreconcilable discrepancy between her weapon of choice and society’s perception of Lizzie as a genteel lady, or a “Protestant nun” as she was called by the legions of her supporters
as an “analytical tool” in examining the “meaning and development of the Borden myth” (100), historian Ann Schofield calls attention to the anxiety embedded within the construction of the fictional Lizzie. Schofield contends that the fictional narratives tend to cast Lizzie as a protagonist of either a “tragic romance or a feminine quest”; if the former is unsatisfactory because it limits “the range of Lizzie’s motivations and her actions to ‘feminine behavior’” expected of a prim and proper church-going lady from a prominent New England family, the latter is equally troubling because even as it allows Lizzie to achieve a “more self-actualized” subjecthood, it also asks that the readers grant reprieve to both Lizzies, fictional and real, by displacing blame on her victims (93).

Schofield considers the original Borden story (i.e., “the events, the murders and Lizzie’s subsequent acquittal”) fully entrenched with its gothic elements as an “ur-text for the contemplation of power, patriarchy, [and] of sexuality” (92). However, as Richard Slotkin discerns, each new telling adds meaning to the original because “the telling implies a metaphoric connection between the storied past and the present” (16). True to form, a more recent verdict of Lizzie and the ongoing reproductions of her story is that while “the Lizzie Borden murder industry won’t die, its feminism has” and at the expense of its capacity to critique the patriarchal discourse, the whole enterprise has 

(Conforti). The Gothic monster, a “contradictory old-figure-made-new [with] its oxymoronic nature” is understood as the “incongruous congruence of the most fundamental anomalies that threaten to engulf people in their contradictions that can most destroy their desired ‘natures’” (Hogle 456-57); masculinized by her hatchet, Miss Lizzie has come to be the gothic monster that perseveres in the American imagination.
simply become “an opportunity to enjoy kitsch and gore” (Zakaria). Taking this recent indictment to task, this essay reads Mary Wilkins Freeman’s “The Long Arm” (1895), one of the earliest attempts to fictionalize the saga of Lizzie Borden. If the multiple retellings of the Lizzie story have resulted in the dissolution of the feminist subtext of the original while continuing to capitalize on the sensational aspects of the trope of the monstrous woman, it may be useful to examine how Freeman’s inaugural text reflects back the gendered subjectivity of Lizzie in the gothic mirror so that we may consider whether that reflection began as an image of subjection or that of autonomy.

At this juncture, it may be useful to define the gothic within the American context. Since the gothic code is generally understood as British, it “loses its usual referents,” according to Teresa A. Goddu, when “modified by American”; just as gothic “unsettles” the idea of America, the modifier American “destabilizes” understandings of the gothic (3-4). Eric Savoy concurs that America, “an optimistic country founded upon the Enlightenment principles of liberty and ‘the pursuit of happiness,’ [and one] that supposedly repudiated the burden of history and its irrational claims” was an unlikely breeding ground for the gothic (167). Even so, gothic cultural production, Savoy argues, has taken on an “odd centrality” in the United States where “the past constantly inhabits the present, . . . and where an insatiable appetite for spectacles of grotesque violence is part of the texture of everyday reality”; Savoy locates the reason in the genre’s capacity to facilitate expressions of “profound anxiety” about historical horrors and “perverse human desires “that cast a shadow over what many would like to be the “sunny American republic” (167-68). Likewise, recognizing that the
gothic tradition serves as a “barometer of disequilibrating social and economic change,” William Patrick Day states that the gothic remained “compelling” throughout the nineteenth century because it “reflected the transformations and tensions” of the American middle-class who were attempting to “adjust to life in a radically new environment, an urban, industrialized, technological, capitalist culture, in which science was replacing religion as the dominant orthodoxy and the pace of change seemed to increase exponentially” (81; Shaw 211). Hence, the gothic has managed to thrive in the inhospitable ground of America because it “serves as a primary means of speaking the unspeakable in American literature [and] many text that are not predominantly gothic use gothic effects at key moments to register cultural contradictions” (Goddu 10).

More relevant to our discussion at hand, the American gothic has traditionally been defined through gender; in comparison with the British gothic, which centers on class conflict, the American gothic, Leslie Fiedler maintains, is “marked by its chary treatment of women and of sex” (31). Fiedler adds that it is the “fear of and flight from the ‘terrible Female’” that distinguishes the American gothic from its British counterpart (76). Seen from this perspective, the Lizzie Borden story (and its subsequent renditions) is replete with gothic possibilities; the Borden murders is a gothic locked-room mystery which reflects “the reality of violence in private families, even ones that seem outwardly affluent or normal” (Yuko). Moreover, the unsubstantiated allegations of incest or of lesbianism renders the Borden home the gothic inside, a perilous site of sexual anxiety where “sexuality breaks against the contemptible limits of convention [and] violence bursts into murder or rape” (Madoff 52). Lizzie is either a “wild and grotesque
murderess” or an ill-fated victim of male and patriarchal dominance (Zakaria). The oppression she suffers is shared by her would-be gothic doubles: her older sister Emma and the live-in maid Bridget Sullivan, doubly bound by her class as well as her gender.

By foregrounding gender in this gothic tale of violence and “deviant” sexuality, what seems to surface is a revisionary urgency to reclaim this tale (and those that follow) as a feminist narrative that restores the monstrous woman from the realm of otherness and redeems her as a “feminist outlaw [that] kills the patriarch, the tyrant, the rule of law, the oppressor, or the seducer” (Schofield 95). Ann Schofield observes that most of the fictional narratives about Lizzie revolve less around the question of “whodunit?”; rather they try to imagine the motive, seeing it as an inroad into interrogating the central motifs of American culture (92). As noted above, Schofield discerns that these fictional narratives take on two trajectories—either one of “tragic romance” or that of “feminist quest”—as both elucidate such “American cultural themes” as violence, “the individual’s longing for liberation” (claimed in some Borden fiction with a specifically feminist agenda) and the representation of a gendered subject, to name a few (93). The narratives which adhere to the romantic formula, says Schofield, tend to limit the fictional Lizzie as a “feminine half” of a relationship and thereby affirm “cultural beliefs that women are

3) Schofield contends that the feminist Lizzie tales rewrite the “American mythology of the outlaw”: the outlaw, “a people’s champion who espouses a type of higher law by defying the established ‘system’ of his times’ is a well-established American folk type. Lizzie . . . is in these renditions a social rebel who challenges unjust authority. . . . She acts from the same sort of moral necessity that legitimates the outlaw” (95).
inherently different from men and will kill only in passion or madness” (94). Granted, the limitations of a feminine gender role are presented critically and in a way, Lizzie does subvert the patriarchal power through her violent act; nevertheless, her triumph is short-lived as these stories generally conclude with Lizzie facing the “consequences of any deviation from the patriarchal script for women,” be it capital punishment or an unfulfilling life of desperation and loneliness (94). Lizzie in “lesbian romances” fare no better since Lizzie’s actions are neither portrayed as “positive or empowering”; in fact, the authors of these narratives seem to imply that “one kind of ‘unnaturalness’ leads to another” (94).

Schofield finds more constructive the narratives which follow the mode of the “feminist quest”; here, Lizzie emerges as an “individual oppressed by historical circumstances and struggling to break free of social constraints . . . sometimes engaged in a quest of self-actualization” (95). The feminist lens, furthermore, allows the readers to understand the “moral necessity” of Lizzie’s monstrous act; Lizzie gains moral ground by removing the “oppressive agent” that is her overbearing father and stepmother and achieving selfhood in the process (95). If the original case and the extensive contemporary coverage of the Borden murders “reaffirm[ed] nineteenth-century ideas about sex roles and sexuality in a society anxious about changing gender roles” (100), the

4) Such prejudice seems to have been prevalent since the turn of the century; Havelock Ellis made a similar argument in his 1897 work Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion. In it, Ellis argues that lesbians or “inverted women” present a “favorable soil for the seeds of passional crime” and are apt to commit acts of “aggressive violence” because they are a dangerous mix of “feminine emotionality, . . . infantile impulsiveness and masculine energy” (qtd. in Rohy 102).
retold tales of Lizzie and what’s now re-imagined as her self-affirming act allow a fictional space in which to envision ways of challenging the rigid gender conventions of a patriarchal and heteronormative society.

Mary Wilkins Freeman’s 1895 short story, “The Long Arm” exemplifies this mode of the feminist quest; in this story, Freeman takes up the questions raised by the Lizzie Borden case (such as that of female subjectivity and violence against and by women) and explores and challenges late nineteenth century cultural images of women and family within a gothic framework.5) According to S. Bradley Shaw, Freeman wrote “The Long Arm” at the suggestion of her friend and literary mentor, S. Edgar Chamberlin, to “solve’ the Fall River ax-murders” (213).6) Using the essential elements of the Borden case, Freeman set it within the genre of detective fiction and produced a gothic “locked-room mystery” in which Sarah Fairbanks, a twenty-nine-year old unmarried schoolteacher is accused of brutally murdering her father. Although she is later cleared by the local police, Sarah finds that she still has to endure the accusatory and surveilling

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5) Schofield mentions Angela Carter’s 1986 short story, “The Fall River Axe Murders” and Sharon Pollock’s 1981 play, Blood Relations as good examples of the feminist quest formula. Please refer to her essay for further analysis of these two works. My textual references to “The Long Arm” are from an online version which initially appeared in The Long Arm and Other Detective Stories (London: Chapman and Hall, 1895).

6) Laura Behling suggests that “The Long Arm” may be patterned after “two real-life murder mysteries in 1892”; in addition to the Lizzie Borden case, the Alice Mitchell case may have also been referred in the constructing the plot of “The Long Arm” (78). The Mitchell case was sensationalized not only for its violence but also for its involvement with “female inverts” and evidence of cross-dressing. More so than the Borden case in which lesbianism was never substantiated, the Mitchell case underscores “the emergence of the subjective lesbian body,” a significant motif in “The Long Arm” (78).
gaze of her neighbors, much like the life-long ostracism suffered by her real-life and historical counterpart, Lizzie. Consequently, Sarah decides to solve the case herself in order to clear her name by becoming her own “judge and jury,” neither of which a woman was permitted to do at that time in American history and to ensure that justice is served for the senseless killing of her father. With the help of a Boston private detective, Sarah uncovers “both the motive for the murder and the identity of the unlikely killer” (213). Romance serves as an important backdrop first by Sarah’s acknowledgement of her fiancé Henry Ellis and his unwavering affection for her, despite her father’s strong opposition to their relationship and then later in the narrative as readers become privy to Martin Fairbanks’ unfortunate romance with Maria Woods, and of course, Phoebe Dole’s obsession for her friend and housemate, Maria. Even as Freeman alludes to romance as a salient element of her narrative, she intimates the importance of positioning Sarah as a subject by not only giving voice to and allowing her suspected protagonist to narrate her own tale but also enlisting her as a detective and involving her in duties which were, especially in the beginning of the genre’s history, recognized as male that required such presumably “male” traits as courage, sharp intellect, and the power of ratiocination.

“The Long Arm” is constructed as Sarah’s journal entries after the grand jury releases her from lack of evidence:

As I take my pen to write this, I have a feeling that I am in the witness-box—for or against myself; which? The place of the criminal in the dock I will not voluntarily take. I will affirm either my innocence
nor my guilt. I will present the fact of the case as impartially and as coolly as if I had nothing at stake. I will let all who read this judge me as they will. (italics mine)

Shaw indicates that Freeman’s “rare use” of the first-person narration appropriates the “gothic convention of the discovered manuscript” (218). Not only that, because it was Lizzie’s continued silence which ultimately turned the public opinion against her and ended up demonizing her, this narrative strategy is significant in that it gives voice to the real and fictional Lizzie to critique and free herself from the public’s groundless suspicion by which she has been “condemned to something infinitely worse than the life-cell or the gallows . . . Open condemnation could not overwhelm me like universal suspicion” (Freeman).

Freeman also delineates Sarah as educated, composed, level-headed, and able to articulate “impartially” the facts of the case; in other words, she is not your typical emotionally unstable, hysterical, tongue-tied damsel in distress waiting for a gallant gentleman to save her from the distressing situation in which she finds herself. And as a schoolteacher, Sarah has achieved some measure of financial independence and is only staying with her father Martin Fairbanks during the long summer vacation out of respect and affection for him, rather than a mercenary concern for the inheritance due her. Sarah admits that she has had to make a heart-breaking sacrifice for her decision; her five-year engagement to Henry Ellis is about to break due to her father’s disapproval. Not only that, she has had to suffer verbal abuse from her father who threaten to “kick [her] out of the house like a dog” if she disobeys his wishes and meets Henry. Leaving aside the
question of Sarah’s reliability as a first-person narrator, the cool and composed Sarah is contrasted against her unreasonable and irascible father and his equally short-tempered cousin Rufus Bennett who, with eyes “glaring like a madman’s,” grabs Martin by the throat during a heated altercation. And when Henry and Sarah have an argument about yet another postponement of their marriage, Henry is the one who gets “angry and say[s] . . . such foolish things not worth repeating.” Even upon the discovery of her father’s death, Sarah feels “like stone” and finds that she “could not weep.” Later in the narrative as Sarah recounts the arrest and subsequent release of both Rufus Bennett and Henry Ellis, she demonstrates a “reasoning practicality” (Shaw 223), and such depictions of Sarah and the men in her life works to undermine the Victorian dichotomy between rational men and emotional women.

Sarah continues to subvert Victorian misconceptions of weak dependent female victims and strong independent male rescuers when she saves her father from Rufus Bennett’s violent outburst. Unlike Rufus’ wife who helplessly screams, “Oh, don’t! Don’t! Oh, he’ll kill him!,” Sarah goes up to Rufus, takes hold of his arm and demands that he let her father go; when Rufus refuses, Sarah takes her father’s pistol and holds the muzzle against Rufus’ forehead and threatens to fire. When her father becomes the aggressor and verbally attacks Sarah with his unreasonable threats to disinherit her if she continues to see Henry Ellis, Sarah returns “his invective with a look so hateful that Martin grows pale and puts his hand to the purple bruises on his throat where Rufus had clutched him” (Shaw 222). Here, Sarah becomes a “gothic heroine” who not only is in a position to be victimized by violence but
also can employ it to her advantage.

In his analysis of how the detective narrative connects to the tradition of gothic literature, William Patrick Day notes that the gothic heroine often functions as the detective (52). Initially, Sarah proves herself to be quite the efficient detective:

My father’s murderer I will find. . . . I shall make an exhaustive examination of the house such as no officer in the case has yet made in the hope of finding a clue. Every room I propose to divide into square yards, by line and measure, and every one of these square yards I will study as if it were a problem in algebra. I have a theory that it is impossible for any human being to enter any house and commit in it a deed of this kind and not leave behind traces which are known quantities in an algebraic equation to those who can use them.

As Shaw notes, Sarah’s “theory about the power of analysis” places her within the tradition of male literary detectives (226); like her male counterparts, she is meticulous and systematic in her investigation and employs a scientific method of investigation. With a microscope she used in school work, Sarah discovers “two bloody footprints on the carpet which no one had noticed before,” a blood stain on one of the shelves in the closet, and a button from a man’s clothing. Upon finding these clues, Sarah tries to infer how these came to be where she has

7) Emily from Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) is a perfect example of a gothic heroine who engages herself in the act of detection; needless to say, while Emily cannot be definitively categorized as a detective, some of her actions, such as courageously exploring Udolpho to rescue her aunt and find her way of escape, demonstrate detective-like qualities. What differentiates the two is that while the heroine is usually freed by accident and chance, the detective “frees himself through understanding” (Day 55).
discovered them; she wonders if the blood stains in the closet were left by the murderer who might have “turned faint after his dreadful deed” and “caught hold of it to steady himself” and she concludes that a loose button means that the garment “belonged to a single man or to one with an idle wife.” I concur with Shaw’s observation that Sarah’s capacity to imagine the crime scene from the criminal’s point of view elevates her to the status of two of the most respected literary detectives: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Holmes and Edgar Allan Poe’s Dupin (226).

But “Freeman backs off,” and as Shaw points out, Sarah is unable to solve the crime “through algebraic analysis”; in the end, Sarah’s endeavors to ratiocinate like a male detective and restore order is deemed “monstrous” and socially unacceptable, and Freeman “slams the brakes on the train carrying her protagonist from victimized gothic heroine to triumphant detective hero” and puts an end to “the evolution of the female detective” (227). If, in the first half of “The Long Arm,” Freeman deviates from and breaks down the Victorian norms of gender by tracing the processes by which Sarah attempts to achieve female selfhood, the second half of Freeman’s story effectively erases this feminist agenda and restores order (not just moral but also patriarchal) as all gothic and detective fictions tend to do. Due to her gender, Sarah can never be like the male detectives:

invented . . . to provide within the world of a story a character who can explain and organize the events into a meaningful pattern. The detective’s essential task . . . is ‘the creation of narrative’ through ‘the scientific use of imagination.’ . . . The detective rearranges the seemingly chaotic and arbitrary events of the mystery story, and in so doing,
discovers who is a criminal and who is not, why the crime has been committed, and thus frees the innocent from the terrors of guilt and uncertainty. (Day 52)

When all is said and done, Sarah is not able to solve her father’s murder because the feminine tools she uses—a seamstress’s yard stick, chalk line, and a housekeeper’s dustpan and brush—to tackle her “algebraic” investigation fall short. Rather, it is Francis Dix, Henry’s eccentric cousin from Boston who, after reading all that Sarah has written to this point and examining all the clues she has gathered “screw[s] up [his face] in a peculiar meditative fashion” and announces that “we’ll ferret this out in three days at the most. “Even though Sarah is the one that finds the figurative smoking gun—the wedding ring her father has given to Maria Woods, his secret lover of forty years—she appears uninspired to even venture a guess as to its significance: “This can hardly be a clue; this can hardly lead to the discovery of a motive.” In a sense, all of Sarah’s detective work is reduced to “raw narrative material” and Francis Dix, as the master detective whose authority is guaranteed by his gender, is the only one that can see beyond the triviality of the mostly “domestic” body of evidence that Sarah assembles—three inches of blue sewing silk, five inches of brown thread, a black button sewn on with white thread, and a wedding band—and give order to this mishmash of clues. Perhaps such a turn is not so surprising; Kathleen Klein argues that “since the appearance of the first professional woman detective, she and her professional competence have been consistently undercut despite overt claims for her abilities, successes, intelligence, and cunning. Although
she is identified as the hero, her authors—whether female or male—seldom allow her to function like one” (1).

With the entrance of Francis Dix, Sarah is voided of her gothic potential to subvert the patriarchal order and is returned to a woman’s “rightful” place, that is under the male guardianship of her soon-to-be husband, Henry Ellis, and under debt to Francis Dix for solving the mystery of her father’s untimely death; Freeman’s story ends with Sarah’s anticipation of wedded bliss, which she says she owes to Mr. Dix whose “kindness [Henry and she] may be able to re-pay some day.” Even Sarah’s promising start as a detective aiming to bring justice for the dead and the wrongly accused peters out as she is relegated to a mere witness of the brilliance of masculine reason which by far outshines her feminine intuition. Interestingly enough, it is at the precise moment of Francis’ arrival at her doorsteps that Sarah returns to a conventional version of femininity; Sarah who, up to this point, remained cool and impassive, finds herself overcome with emotion and feels “tears coming to [her] eyes” at the mere offer of assistance from Francis.

Shaw, like Schofield, contends that the mode of the “feminine quest” has the capacity to challenge the gender status quo; he argues that while “its dismissal of Sarah’s detective abilities, its happy resolution, and its promise of marriage” suggest that Freeman produced a “culturally conservative narrative,” “The Long Arm” still manages to unsettle the conventions of gender by the “peculiar power” that its female characters are given: Sarah’s powers of deduction (albeit short-lived) and Phoebe Dole’s capacity to scheme and execute a heinous crime (234). However, we must question such impulse to be overly idealistic about the female-empowering messages hidden within
Freeman’s short story. That the killer turns out to be a woman reinforces the notion that women beget chaos, not order and what they destroy, only men can re-build.

Phoebe, in addition to Sarah, is yet another reflection of Lizzie in Freeman’s short story, also with the wherewithal to subvert the patriarchal order. As a local dressmaker, Phoebe keeps all the women in the village “under her thumb” and the women’s “garments are visible proofs of [Phoebe’s] force of will”; in her relationship with the “sweet, weakly, dependent” Maria Woods, Phoebe has acted as a “shield,” a caretaker all of their lives. Like Sarah, the strong-willed and financially independent Phoebe is disarmed of her capacity to subvert by being reduced to a monstrous killer. In confessing to the crime, Phoebe asserts that she was prompted to kill with a pair of sewing shears because her life with Maria was threatened by Martin’s proposal of marriage: “She’s lived with me in that house for over forty years. There are other ties as strong as the marriage one, that are just as sacred. What right had he to take her away from me and break up my home?” However, we see that Phoebe’s obsessive affection for her friend is regarded as “dreadful strange” even by Maria herself who see their relationship as that of “subordination,” not of friendship. Behling argues that Freeman “seems to criticize the patriarchal heterosexual system that refused to value the integrity of these women’s emotions” (87); nevertheless, as previously noted, Maria does not reciprocate Phoebe’s affections for her. Rather, Maria appears broken down by Martin’s death, even before it is revealed that they were long-time lovers. Not only that, she requests the return of the ring Martin gave her forty years ago and when she receives it she “kissed it and sobbed
like a child: ‘Phoebe took it away from me before but she shan’t this time,’ she said.” Maria is perhaps the only one that can understand the complexity of female companionship shared by Phoebe and herself but the fact that Maria aligns herself with a heteronormative connection to Martin only italicizes that Phoebe’s unrequited love is what marks her as monstrous.

Phoebe’s “almost abnormally long arm” thus comes to signify the rest of her perversities: her lesbian desires for Maria and her “unnatural” act of murder. When Francis reveals that Phoebe is the murderer, Sarah refuses to believe him at first, claiming that it is “an absurd possibility” because “she is a woman.” However, Sarah comes to accept Phoebe’s guilt upon seeing her disproportionately long arm, her manly stride, and her “widely spread” footprints which were even wider than her father’s shoes. Despite the attempts to femininize Phoebe and the crime she committed via her occupation and her weapon of choice, it is, in the end, Phoebe’s “unnatural” female body (which emblematizes her “unnatural” (homo) sexuality) that reifies her as the gothic monster; even Phoebe’s confession, which is delivered with a “dreadful calmness,” leads Sarah to “believe in demoniacal possession.” If Freeman’s “The Long Arm” portrays two women through whom the author is able to explore the “monstrous aspects of women’s lives” (Stein 123)—such as desiring subjecthood and of rejecting heteronormativity—both suffer a similar fate: termination of the capacity to transgress. Sarah is denied any further opportunities to achieve subjectivity as her heterosexuality prompts her return to a socially acceptable position of a wife by the story’s end. As for Phoebe, her homosexuality renders her irredeemable in the patriarchal
economy, and relegated as the monster, she is punished by death, which symbolizes a complete and utter removal from society.

Needless to say, Freeman’s “The Long Arm” as well as the original Lizzie Borden story demonstrate that even tales that foreground female monstrosity can be read constructively. Indeed, it may be the anxiety about this overlay of a feminist agenda that drives the multiple retellings of Lizzie’s narrative. Ultimately, readers find that vilifying Lizzie through the reductive lens of the tragic romance is equally troubling as valorizing her through the constructive lens of a feminist quest. Although the multiple representations underscore Lizzie’s body as an exploitable body, the numerous retellings of the Lizzie narrative is still positive in that each offers us insights as to how women as gendered subjects are perceived at different historical and social junctures of American society.
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정혜연
성신여자대학교 부교수

논문투고일자: 2019. 12. 01
심사완료일자: 2019. 12. 16
게재확정일자: 2019. 12. 23
Abstract

“In the Gothic Mirror”: Reflections of Female Monstrosity in “The Long Arm”

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The story of Lizzie Borden has served as a creative impetus in the American imagination; following the hundred years after the Borden murders, a remarkable body of creative work has been produced. Ann Schofield asserts that the Borden story has become an “ur-text for the contemplation of power, of patriarchy, [and] of sexuality” (92). In reading Mary Wilkins Freeman’s “The Long Arm” (1895), this essay re-considers Schofield’s claim that the Borden story and its subsequent renditions enable a revisionary take on female subjectivity and resistance to patriarchal order. More specifically, this essay examines how Freeman’s text (one of the first to fictionalize the saga of Lizzie Borden) reflects back the gendered subjectivity in the in the gothic mirror for us to consider whether that reflection began as an image of subjection or that of autonomy.

Key Words
Lizzie Borden, the Gothic tradition, Mary Wilkins Freeman, “The Long Arm,” Gendered subjectivity