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Nan Prince and the Golden Apples

by JOSEPHINE DONOVAN

ON THE Thacher homestead where Adeline Thacher Prince and her infant daughter Nan arrive exhausted one November evening—the opening scene of Sarah Orne Jewett’s novel A Country Doctor (1884)—there is a golden apple tree. “Whether it were some favoring quality in that spot of soil or in the sturdy old native tree itself, the rich golden apples had grown there, year after year, in perfection, but nowhere else.”

The apple tree is, of course, associated with the Garden of Eden in Judeo-Christian myth, but the Tree of Life in Greek mythology is also a bearer of golden apples, guarded by the Hesperides, the Daughters of Evening. The golden apple tree in A Country Doctor symbolizes the paradisiacal women’s community envisioned in the literature of the nineteenth-century women’s local color school.

Jewett’s novel opens in the evening when wayward daughter, Adeline Prince, returns defeated from her excursion into patriarchal territory, back to the rural female sanctuary where three women—Adeline’s mother, Mrs. Thacher, and two sisters, Eliza and Jane Dyer—sit knitting, reminiscing and eating golden apples and cake. It is yet another Jewett image of the consoling female community, the world of the mothers, of Demeter. It is evening, the moon is on the wane; Persephone is returning, dying, to the land of her mother’s garden.

Nan Prince, the infant daughter, spends her formative years in this matriarchal sanctuary. An Artemis-Diana figure, she is nourished and empowered in the wild zone, in nature, in a female wilderness.

The motif of the golden apples provides us with a useful thread by which to reanalyze this important Jewett novel, which expresses so directly the central theme of late nineteenth-century women’s literature: whether to leave the mother’s garden, the female world of love and ritual, for the new realms of patriarchal knowledge that are opening up to women, thanks largely to the gains made by the nineteenth-century women’s rights movement.

Throughout the women’s literature of the period, but especially in key

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stories by Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, we note an intense ambivalence felt by women characters between the women's rural world on the one hand and on the other the beckoning world of wider knowledge and broader horizons offered by entrance into male-dominated institutions and professions such as medicine, hitherto barred to women. One Freeman story is indeed entitled “The Tree of Knowledge” (1900). Here as elsewhere in women’s literature the fear is that the intrusion of men and/or patriarchal knowledge will destroy women’s culture and epistemological traditions. In Freeman’s story one character wonders “if it might not sometimes be better to guard the Tree of Knowledge with the flaming sword, instead of the gates of a lost Paradise.”

In another Freeman story, “Evelina’s Garden” (1896), the central character is driven to destroy her “mother’s garden” literally by ripping up the plants by the roots, and by pouring boiling water and salt upon them. This scorched earth gesture is a symbolic representation of the traumatic destruction of women’s culture that occurred around the turn of the century. And, of course, “A White Heron” (1886), published shortly after A Country Doctor, is another powerful representation of the tension between the world of the mothers and encroaching patriarchal imperialism. Nan Prince’s story is an early attempt by a woman writer to wrestle with this issue.

A figure from Greek mythology associated with the golden apples whose story illuminates here is Atalante, who one authority stipulates is a “by-form of Artemis.” Brought up in the wild, she could “outshoot and outrun and outwrestle” all the men who opposed her. Like other Dianas “she had no liking for men except as companions . . . and she was determined never to marry.” She does, however, agree to wed the first man who can defeat her in a foot-race, since she knows that none can. Finally, however, a suitor appears who carries three golden apples from the Hesperides’ Tree of Life. At intervals through the race he throws them before Atalante, who stops to pick them up, thereby losing the race.

If in A Country Doctor these apples represent the paradisiacal women’s community, then the message of Atalante is that Nan Prince must relinquish the apples if she is to win the race, if she is to succeed in patriarchal institutions, if she is to become a male professional. That is, she must leave behind the women’s world and its culture.

The golden apples are mentioned twice again in the novel. The first time is during one of the few moments when Nan reveals an inclination toward “romantic friendship” with other women or, to put it in more modern

terms, a lesbian tendency. That occurs during her school years when she develops a “smash” on one of her girlfriends. “[A]fter one of the elder girls had read a composition which fired our heroine’s imagination, she worshiped this superior being from a suitable distance, and was her willing adorer and slave. The composition was upon The Moon . . .” (82)—a repetition of the Diana motif. Nan gives this idol some of the “treasured” golden apples from the Thacher farm. In this context Nan fantasizes returning one day to the rural homestead as “the reigning queen,” and having as “the favored guest” “the author of the information about the moon” (83).

The final mention of the apple tree occurs in the concluding episode of the novel when Nan, now a physician, returns to the rural area where she grew up, visits her mother’s grave and thanks God for her future. In this important scene Nan reconnects to her matriarchal roots: the Dyer women accept her as a doctor; Nan considers that her mother’s spirit had been “guiding her” all along, and she gathers a couple of golden apples. Now, however, it is daylight, a contrast to the dark night in which her mother had trod the same path, suicidal, years before. In Jewett’s notes for A Country Doctor, which are in The Houghton Library, she outlines its conclusion as follows: “For end—goes down to the river shore and sees the old graves & everything by day that her mother passed by night and sits in the [word unclear] of juniper and looks across the river at her future!”

It is clear from this and from the structure of the novel that Nan’s relationship with her mother is pivotal. The death of the mother is the opening scene; the reconnection with the mother’s spirit, the concluding scene. Nan’s critical decision to become a doctor occurs epiphanally in the area associated with her mother near the Thacher homestead. In a period of despondence after graduation from secondary school Nan realizes that traditional women’s lives bore her, that like her mother she had a “longing for The Great Something Else” (171). “Of course, she could keep the house, but . . . any one with five senses . . . could . . . do any of the ordinary work of existence . . . she wanted something more” (164). With these reflections in mind Nan treks through the brush, “unconscious that she had been following her mother’s footsteps, or that fate had again brought her here for a great decision” (165). In these critical moments of the novel’s plot-structure Nan is connected with her mother.

Adeline Thacher Prince represents the dark side of the rural nineteenth-century female world. We learn that she too had been ambitious, had had “dreadful high notions” (24), had become alcoholic, and returned “beggarly” (36), suicidal, and “worse than defeated, from the battlefield of life” (33). We also learn that she was somewhat frivolous and wasted her money on fancy clothes. She is hardly a model one would wish a daughter

to emulate, and all are concerned lest Nan follow her mother's footsteps literally.

But the premise of the novel is that Nan is able to reject and transcend the negative aspects of women's condition, while retrieving and integrating the positive. Most of the other women in the novel are depicted as living boringly repetitive and limited existences. Like Adeline several of them express dissatisfaction. Mrs. Graham, an Oldfields neighbor and friend of Dr. Leslie's, is immobilized; her only view of the world is through a window where she perennially sits. "I cannot see that the world changes much," she says. "I find my days piteously alike..." (142). In Dunport Eunice Fraley comments "sadly," "I so often feel as if I were not accomplishing anything. . . . It came over me today that here I am, really an old woman, and I am just about where I first started,—doing the same things over and over and no better than ever" (204). The other women—Grandmother Thacher, the Dyer sisters, Marilla, and Miss Prince, Nan's aunt—have similarly lived cyclical, non-progressive lives. In later works, such as The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896), "Miss Tempy's Watchers" (1888), and "Martha's Lady" (1897), stasis and repetition are seen as a kind of via negativa, a redemptive experience, but here, as in other early works like "A Guest at Home" (1882), such a life is seen darkly as something to be escaped from, or transcended.

This then helps to explain one of the central questions raised by the novel: why does Nan decide to become a doctor, like Dr. Leslie, rather than an herbal-healer after the fashion of Eliza Dyer. At one point Nan lays aside a treatise on the nervous system and commences gathering herbs. Dr. Leslie remarks, "You will be the successor of Mrs. Martin Dyer, and the admiration of the neighborhood" (178). Yet Nan does not follow in the women's healing tradition; she does not elect to become a Mrs. Dyer or a Mrs. Todd but rather a professional "regular" physician. Why?

I suggest there are several reasons. First, as noted, she wanted to move beyond the limitations of the rural women's world, especially its negative aspects, and in this sense move beyond her mother and the other women in the novel. Second, she knows that herbal healing does not have the authority of professional medicine. Mrs. Dyer is only "next to the doctor himself" the neighborhood "authority on all medical subjects" (29). And Nan clearly wants to be a leader, an authority: she holds the reins on her excursions with Dr. Leslie, she wants to pull the oars in her boating trips with suitor George Gerry. Nan wants to win Atalante's race.

The third and fourth reasons are more complex. Jewett herself said that medicine was simply a metaphor in the novel for any calling.9 We may

9. This comment Jewett wrote on the back of a letter she had received from S. S. McClure, dated 7 June 1889, in which he had asked her for a story that would embody her "ideal young woman." Houghton MS A1743.7. Cited by permission of The Houghton Library, Harvard University. See also Malinda Snow, "'That One Talent': The Vocation as Theme in Sarah Orne Jewett's A Country Doctor," Colby Library Quarterly, XVI (1980), 138-47.
assume that the calling that she had preeminently in mind was writing. At several points in the novel Jewett makes allusions to literature, and in particular to the rural stories or oral histories that she feels are worthy of written transcription.

When the three women are reminiscing in the Thacher farmhouse early in the novel, as they eat the apples, they relate various family stories. The narrator compares the ritual of rural story-telling to urban theatre-going. The repetitions of the best stories are signal events, for ordinary circumstances do not inspire them. Affairs must rise to a certain level before a narration of some great crisis is suggested, and exactly as a city audience is well contented with hearing the plays of Shakespeare over and over again, so each man and woman of experience is permitted to deploy their well-known but always interesting stories upon the rustic stage. (16)

Later Mrs. Graham tells Dr. Leslie: “You doctors ought to be our historians, for you alone see the old country folks familiarly and can talk with them without restraint” (141). Dr. Leslie replies that active practitioners have no time for writing; only medical scholars write and they lack the practical experience that would “make their advice reliable” (141)—a characteristic expression of Dr. Leslie’s antiestablishmentarianism.

While in Dunport Nan listens enthusiastically to Mrs. Fraley’s narrative. “Really,” she exclaims, “I think her stories of the old times are wonderfully interesting. I wish I had a gift for writing them down whenever I am listening to her” (276). As we all know, Sarah Orne Jewett had that gift, and if we consider A Country Doctor to be fictionalized autobiography, we can identify Jewett’s process of becoming a writer with Nan’s of becoming a physician, locating it within the antithesis between women’s culture and patriarchal systems specified above. In other words, I suggest that Jewett herself faced the same question as Nan—of remaining within the women’s world or of entering the mainstream of patriarchal production. Nan’s decision to become a professional doctor and not a woman-herbalist parallels Jewett’s determination to become a professional author and not just a scribbling woman.

Another story by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, “A Poetess” (1891), exemplifies this dilemma. The writer in this case is an impoverished spinster whose art is occasional mourning verse written primarily for neighbor women whose children have died. Her reward is the consolation it brings her friends. Their praise is to her “as if her poem had been approved and accepted by one of the great magazines.”10 Betsey’s art does not enter the mainstream of patriarchal discourse, but rather, privately printed and circulated among a group of women, it remains within the Dianic enclave, which nourished and enabled it. Betsey thus remains a poetess and not a poet; worse, she finally burns all her work after it has been condemned as

sentimentalist trash by a local minister, casting patriarchal judgment. Thus Betsey is reduced to silence.

Here the perspective offered by the post-modernist French feminist critics is illuminating. For they pose women's entrance into culture as into a male-defined sign system, the Symbolic. As Xavière Gauthier explains, women can “find ‘their’ place within the linear, grammatical, linguistic system that orders the symbolic, the superego, the law . . . a system based entirely upon one fundamental signifier: the phallus.” Or, they can refuse to engage in patriarchal systems. This means, however, they remain silent. But, “as long as women remain silent, they will be outside the historical process. But, if they begin to speak and write as men do, they will enter history subdued and alienated. . . .”11 As Mary Jacobus put it, “access to a male-dominated culture may . . . be felt to bring with it a silencing of the ‘feminine,’ a loss of women's inheritance.”12

I propose that Jewett was sensitive to this issue. Nan Prince like her author wished to have access to male-dominated culture because such entrance lent one authority and gave one power: it gave one a cultural voice. To avoid such entrance, to remain in the wild zone, in those matriarchal pockets of rural New England, meant one's experience would never be inscribed in history. Sylvia in “A White Heron” exemplifies this choice: she remains silent and thereby preserves the female sanctuary, but she remains illiterate, outside the traditions of recorded history and literature.

This was not a choice that Jewett could make. Just as the writer-narrator in The Country of the Pointed Firs could not remain in Dunnet Landing, Nan could not remain in Oldfields, and Jewett could not remain in South Berwick. They all chose to seek patriarchal status and to have cultural authority. Their passages were facilitated, however, by feminine or feminized mentors who had themselves access to patriarchal institutions: Annie Fields in the case of Jewett, Dr. Leslie in the case of Nan.

Dr. Leslie is worth a moment’s consideration. It is true he is a man and something of a father-figure (it is well known that he was modeled on Jewett’s own father, himself a country doctor). However, he is as non-tyrannical a patriarch as one could imagine, himself an outsider and a rebel, one who is skeptical of the received authority of medical scholarship, who reveres women's healing traditions and is something of an “irregular,” to use the medical vernacular of the day. He practices a fully “feminized” philosophy of child-rearing, that of non-intervention (promoted by the Beecher sisters, among others); he fully allows Nan to grow

as she will, to do as she pleases, often slipping into a passive role with her (as when she drives the carriage).

Jewett's third reason for having Nan choose Dr. Leslie rather than the herb-woman as her model was therefore, I suggest, that she was justifying her own choice of writing as vocation, a choice that meant entrance into patriarchal institutions, which Jewett wished to use in order to preserve and serve the matriarchal world where her roots remained. Nan represents this attempt to "raid," as it were, patriarchal systems in order to promote, exalt, enhance matriarchy.

Finally, I believe Jewett wrote this novel in the spirit of liberal feminism to argue that women could honorably engage in traditionally masculine careers such as authorship and medicine without forsaking their female identities; that where such vocations may entail a repudiation of traditional female roles, they do not mean that one has thereby become a man. And in this way Jewett engaged in the tricky dialog about gender role identity that was heating up in the 1880s, thanks to the advent of the so-called sexologists.

The prevailing medical opinion in the nineteenth century had been that "motherhood was woman's natural destiny and those females who thwarted . . . their body's design must expect to suffer." In the early 1870s Dr. E. H. Clarke of the Harvard Medical School published his Sex in Education which urged that women were "destroying their wombs and their childbearing potential by presuming to pursue a course of higher education intended by nature only for the male sex. . . ." It was "unnatural" for women to pursue higher education, just as it was "unnatural" for them to be feminists. As early as 1837 the Pastoral Letter written against the Grimke sisters noted: "When she assumes the place and tone of a man as a public reformer . . . her character becomes unnatural." And, of course, feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft, who by the way in 1792 advocated women physicians, Frances Wright, and others were condemned as "semi-women, mental hermaphrodites" in the literature of "true womanhood."

But anti-feminism received its greatest boost when the theories of the European sexologists, in particular those of German physician Richard von Krafft-Ebing, appeared in the 1880s. I propose that A Country Doctor may have been one of the earliest feminist repudiations of Krafft-Ebing and other theorists who saw women's choice of masculine vocations as unnatural, indeed pathological.

In Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, first published in Germany in 1882, and in this country in 1886, women who do not marry and bear children are not "real" women; passivity is seen as women's natural style. Krafft-Ebing connected these tendencies with sexual attraction to women, or what later became labeled lesbianism, which he called "antipathic sexual instinct." This "type" of woman—that is, one who was childless, who aspired after a traditionally masculine occupation, who was attracted to other women, and who in some cases adopted a "mannish" style was called a "viragint." Krafft-Ebing believed that such inclinations were in many cases congenital, the result of hereditary degeneration. Many of the parents of such freaks were alcoholics, for example.

Not only does Nan Prince in many ways resemble this type, it seems probable that the extensive discussions of what is natural and unnatural in the novel relate to this issue.

Dr. Leslie early announces: "I see plainly that Nan is not the sort of girl who will be likely to marry. When a man or woman has that sort of self-dependence and unnatural self-reliance, it shows itself very early. I believe that it is a mistake for such a woman to marry" (137). The doctor notes further: "Nan's feeling toward her boy-playmates is exactly the same as toward the girls she knows" (137). In other words, Nan was not particularly interested in boys, a disinterest that later dismays her suitor, George Gerry. Indeed, we have noted her crush on a girl school-mate, and even during her courtship period she seems more interested in Mary Parish, who is her "favorite among her new friends" (262). In fact, the main appeal of George is that he "did not trouble Nan with unnecessary attentions, as some young men had . . . ." (263). He does not insist "upon her remembering that he was a man and she a girl . . . ." (244). The roles are further dislodged in the episode where Nan quickly takes charge and deftly sets an injured man's dislocated shoulder when George stands helplessly by. Afterwards George "felt weak and womanish, and somehow wished it had been he who could play the doctor" (266). Later we learn he feels "his manliness was at stake" (295). Curiously, in her notes for the novel Jewett specifies George was "not a bit effeminate,"17 which she excised from the final version, although she does stress that he was a "manly fellow" (246, 291). Nevertheless, Nan discovers that she cannot accept the passive role, she cannot play "yielding maiden" (319), and so she rejects George.

Earlier Nan's schoolmates had to reassure themselves that "their schoolmate showed no sign of being the sort of girl who tried to be mannish and to forsake her natural vocation for a profession" (160)—which seems to me a clear-cut response to the Krafft-Ebing theory of the "viragint." Nan did not even look "strong-minded" (160), and in her notes for the novel Jewett amplifies in another excised passage: "[Nan]

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shrunk from the conspicuous and by no means alluring example of some so-called strong-minded women whom she knew. . ."  

And in the novel Jewett stresses how much "a little lady" (220) Nan was; how she was "anything but self-asserting," which of course is contradicted by her behavior throughout the novel; she nevertheless "had no noisy fashion of thrusting herself before the public gaze" (301), and medicine, Jewett urges, is a "most womanly and respectable calling" (193).

Nevertheless, as a child Nan had wished "over and over again that [she] was a boy . . ." (180). And Dr. Leslie noting her "unnatural" bent, early decides that she should devote herself to something other "than the business of housekeeping and what is called a woman's natural work . . ." (137). For "it was not with her, as with many of her friends, that the natural instinct toward marriage, and the building and keeping of a sweet home-life, ruled all other plans and possibilities" (159).

Many of Krafft-Ebing's descriptions of women "tainted with antipathic sexual instinct" bear a resemblance to Nan. Case # 130, for example, describes a Mrs. X who "used to rove about the fields and woods in the freest manner, and climbed the most dangerous rocks and cliffs" (324). Nan Prince was "wild as a hawk" (60). "She won't go to bed till she's a mind to . . . she'd be'n up into . . . oaks, trying to catch a little screech owl. She belongs with the wild creatur's . . . just the same natur'" (61). "She'll run like a fox all day long . . ." (62).

Krafft-Ebing's Mrs. X: "When attending the first and only ball she felt interest in intellectual conversation, but not in dancing or the dancers . . ." (325), a reaction one could readily imagine of Nan. "She was startled . . . at the flight and novelty of her thoughts, at her quick and precise method of arriving at conclusions and forming opinions . . ." (336), similarly applicable to Nan. Krafft-Ebing further notes, "the female urning [another term applied to the "congenital" female "invert"] may chiefly be found in the haunt of boys. She is their rival in play. . . . Love for art finds a substitute in the pursuits of the sciences" (399).

Other traits of the female "urning" which Nan displays are that she exhibits a lack of "taste for female work" (Krafft-Ebing, 409), a "lack of skill and liking for female occupations, [a] bold and tomboyish" style (420). Case # 162, held as an example of "viraginity," preferred boys' games as a child, and "had always preferred masculine work, and has shown unusual skill in it" (421). Finally, Nan is clearly depicted as being in a line of congenital degeneracy. Her mother, as noted, was an alcoholic, had "a touch of insanity" (99), and was suicidal.

Many of Krafft-Ebing’s “cases” are cross dressers. Jewett does not deal with this issue in this novel (Nan is disinterested in clothes), but does in two other stories of this period: “An Autumn Holiday” (1880) and “Hollowell's Pretty Sister” (1880). “Tom’s Husband” (1882) and “Farmer Finch” (1885) also address the issue of gender role reversal.20

“Virtually every literate European household” had a copy of the Psychopathia Sexualis soon after its appearance in 1882, the year Jewett and Annie Fields made their first trip to Europe.21 Fields had a reading knowledge of German, the language in which it was published. Sarah’s father, Theodore Herman Jewett, was a specialist in “obstetrics and diseases of women and children.”22 While he died in 1878, Krafft-Ebing and other sexologists (Ulrichs, Moll, Westphal) had been publishing their theories about female inverts since 1869. Carl von Westphal, for example, in 1869 “published a case study of a young woman who from childhood on preferred to dress as a boy and play boy’s games, and had always been attracted to women . . . [She] became a new type . . . and medical journals became flooded with papers on women like Westphal’s.”23

We know that Dr. Leslie, Dr. Jewett’s analog, has an extensive medical library, subscribes to the latest medical journals (187), and rejects European medical opinion (at one point he lays aside a French volume in annoyance [129]). Nan herself occasionally reads these works but generally with similar disregard.

It seems likely that Dr. Jewett would have been aware of the sexologists’ theories and that he and Sarah may have discussed them. Her own proclivities could have readily identified with this “new type” of woman that European theorists were condemning as a pathological freak.24 Naturally, she and her father would have rejected those theories. They did so by espousing a different concept of nature, one derived from the organismist

20. Several works of the period featured women physicians: Harriet Beecher Stowe’s My Wife and I (1871), Mark Twain’s Gilded Age (1873), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s Dr. Zay (1882), William Dean Howells’s Dr. Breen’s Practice (1881), and Louisa May Alcott’s Jo’s Boys (1886). Two works immediately following A Country Doctor are of particular interest. Oliver Wendell Holmes’s A Mortal Antipathy (1885) recounts a romantic friendship between two women, one of whom wishes to become a physician. The denouement is that each of the women friends marries and the potential medical student renounces her ambition. Interestingly, Holmes uses the Atalanta morif consciously in the novel, having the women defeat the men in a canoe race; their boat is the “Atalanta.” The work also appears to parody sexologist case studies by noting cases where men developed “antipathies” to spiders and women, respectively—which suggests that the notion of “antipathic” instincts was definitely in the air in Boston in the 1880s. Henry James’s The Bostonians (1885) also followed on the heels of A Country Doctor. It presents a woman physician, Dr. Prance (surely a verbal echo of Prince), relatively positively, but more critically the women’s rights movement and the “romantic friendship” between Olive Chancellor and Verena Tar­rant. At least one scholar has suggested that James had Annie Fields and Jewett specifically in mind in creating these characters (see Helen Howe, The Gentle Americans, 1864–1960: Biography of a Breed [New York: Harper, 1965], p. 83), but this remains speculation.


Romantic theory promoted by Emerson and Margaret Fuller: that people like plants are born with inherited designs or entelechies and that the individual must be allowed to unfold as this predisposition dictates. Hence the numerous organic metaphors in the work. Dr. Leslie resolves, for example, to let Nan grow “as naturally as the plant grows, not having been clipped back or forced in any unnatural direction” (102). Nan is described as a flower that “has sprung up fearlessly under the great sky, with only the sunshine and the wind and summer rain to teach it . . .” (303). Like Margaret Fuller’s ideal feminist in Woman in the Nineteenth Century, Nan was allowed to “learn [her] rule [not] from without, [but] to unfold it from within.”

In this sense Nan is an exemplar of liberal feminism with its emphasis on individualism, as epitomized in Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s 1891 address, “Solitude of Self,” and assimilationism, that women should enter into established masculine professions. But, we have tried to suggest, the novel goes beyond this liberal perspective. Rather, it is another of Jewett’s attempts at synthesis. Unlike later writers for whom a return to the Dianic wilderness is an escape, a retreat from patriarchal oppression, or for whom, as in the case of Edith Wharton, the Dianic world is seen as one of suffocating limitation, Jewett’s protagonist was able to negotiate between patriarchal systems and Demeter’s world, the land of the golden apples. Although discriminated against, Nan is not destroyed or subdued by her experience in medical school. Unlike her mother, a Persephone, Nan returns from her other-world journey unscathed. Nor is she required to abandon or to silence feminine traditions. What is achieved is a synthesis, or what Hegel called Aufhebung; in the dialectical process those traditions and Nan herself have been elevated to a higher plane.

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