WANTING TO BE WANTED

ABOUT TEN YEARS AGO, while reading a biography of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, I came across something he said about women that struck me as uncomfortably true: women want to be wanted, not to be loved. He meant that women sought to be desirable rather than to be fully known. Lacan arrived at this conclusion after years of psychoanalyzing and seducing women. (That is to say, he attempted to psychoanalyze some women and to seduce others. A heavily rationalized womanizer, he seduced many women, but I doubt that he successfully psychoanalyzed any.) A sometimes brilliant theoretician, Lacan was also sexist and terribly arrogant, so I wondered if I could take his claim seriously. Yet, despite my doubt, the idea stayed with me.

Over the ensuing years I read many feminist accounts of female desire, but I came across nothing quite as bold and
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blatant as Lacan's claim. A psychoanalyst myself, I am also a feminist, a mother and a wife, a writer, a teacher of psychotherapy, and a student of Buddhism. In all of these roles I find it useful to keep my ears and eyes open to the unspoken, the unwritten, and the unconscious. So while I tucked away the idea of women wanting to be wanted and continued to go about my business of seeing people in individual psychotherapy, Jungian analysis, and couples therapy, in the back of my mind this notion was having an effect. That women might be driven by the desire to be desirable, rather than by the desire to be known and loved, became the background music for much that I heard about female desire both in and out of psychotherapy for the next ten years.

I now believe that Lacan was basically right about the problem of female desire, but instead of seeing it as a normal aspect of female character, as he believed, I see it as a damaging affliction of female development in societies where women are expected to please men. The compulsion to be desired and desirable undermines self-direction, self-confidence, and self-determination in women from adolescence through old age, in all our roles, from daughter to mother, from lover to wife, from student to worker or leader, whether or not the affliction is conscious.

Wanting to be wanted is about finding our power in an image rather than in our own actions. We try to appear attractive, nice, good, valid, legitimate, or worthy to someone else, instead of discovering what we actually feel and want for ourselves. In this kind of conscious or unconscious arrangement, other people are expected to provide our own feelings of power, worth, or vitality, at the expense of our authentic development. We then feel resentful, frustrated, and out of control because we have sacrificed our real needs and desires to the arrangements we have made with others. We find ourselves always wanting to be seen in a positive light; the perfect mother, the ideal friend, the seductive lover, the slender or athletic body, the kind neighbor, the competent boss. In place of knowing the truth of who we are and what we want from our lives, we become trapped in images.

Wanting to be wanted is not codependency. It's not some-thing that develops out of someone else's needs or demands. Rather, it is a desire for power and control that has been trans-formed and hidden. Instead of learning how to fulfill this—our own—desire, we learn gradually, but clearly, how to fulfill others'. This dynamic is rooted in the widespread psychological and social constraints on female power. For, in spite of feminism, female power—decisiveness, status, command, influence—cannot be expressed directly at home or in the work-place without arousing suspicion, confusion, fear, or dread. Both women and men still tend to experience female power as exotic at best and dangerous and despicable at worst. Lacking clear avenues for developing our power directly, we learn to be indirect in making emotional arrangements based on others' needs and wants, and how we would like to be seen.

Nor is wanting to be wanted the expression of a desire for intimacy or closeness. Rather, wanting to be wanted makes us feel as though we have no clear desires of our own. We focus on how to bring things under control by appearing in a certain way, speaking in a certain manner, implying our needs. Yet we never say directly what we want, and we may never actually know. We have been culturally programmed so thoroughly to tune in to the subtleties of whether or not we are having the "desired effect" that we fail to tune in to what we really want
or to see how strongly we are motivated by wanting to be wanted.

Many times in individual and couples psychotherapy, I have faced a woman and said, "What do you want here?" and she has replied, "I really don't know" or "This is what the children and my husband need" or "What do you think?" If I push further and gently ask her to come up with some answer—any answer—she usually gets flustered and apologetic. She either doesn't know or is afraid to say what she wants.

**Female Power**

In 1987 psychologist Florence Wiedemann and I published a book titled *Female Authority: Empowering Women Through Psychotherapy*, in which we detailed a condition that we called the double bind of female authority: women are damned if they claim their authority (they are called controlling, dominating, bitches, or even feminazis) and damned if they don't (they are called manipulative, dependent, depressed, or worse, immature and self-defeating). We addressed the problem that results when girls and women believe that authority and knowledge lie wholly outside themselves—in men, gods, or institutions such as school or church. Since then I have helped many women in psychotherapeutic and educational settings to restore their personal authority, claim their competence and voices, and seek satisfaction in their lives.

Yet as successful as many of these women have become, they often feel "out of control" in their personal lives. Although they can speak openly and passionately about the values and principles they believe in, and defend others' rights, they still resist claiming and asserting personal needs and desires, especially when these are in conflict with others'. They fear being seen as too bossy or too self-absorbed.

Anne is just such a woman, in her midforties, whom I have come to know through weekly sessions of psychotherapy over the past two years. She is a professor and part-time dean at a local college. Articulate, conscientious, always prepared for her therapy meetings, Anne appears to others to be in control of her life. She is the mother of three lively children, one son and two daughters, the eldest of whom is away at college. Her children do well academically and socially. She is married to a "nice guy"—a laid-back professional who spends a lot of his free time outdoors with their children, camping, hiking, skiing. He's also an egalitarian spouse who runs the kitchen and chauffeurs the kids. Anne appreciates all of this about John, especially his parenting skills.

A grateful feminist, Anne enjoys both her career and her family. She is decisive, well regarded as a leader at work, and admired by her many friends. Certainly no one would dub her a crybaby or victim. On the surface Anne appears to have every reason to be completely happy and satisfied with her life.

You may know someone like Anne who seems to have it all; you may even envy her. But each week when I meet with Anne, she is full of complaints. She talks mostly about feeling that her life is out of her control: she never has a moment to herself, is almost always overwhelmed and overworked. She has no time for her own creative outlet, a combination of sculpting and painting, and she feels dominated by others' needs and demands. The disparity between how Anne appears and what she feels about herself and her life is a symptom of wanting to be wanted.

Anne's compulsion to be desirable begins with the fundamental belief that power—the right, capacity, or authority to
act or influence others on her behalf—is not legitimately hers but resides in the eye of the beholder. She struggles mightily with how she is seen by others, not wanting anyone to think she is demanding or pushy. Anne often tells me about feeling empty—lost, betrayed, or abandoned. Sometimes in a dream she is alone in a large building or tent and does not know which way to turn or if there is anyone who can help.

Anne resents many of the things she has agreed to do at work and at home, even with her friends. She recently spent the evening with a good friend who took hours to recount the details of a trek she and her partner had taken through some mountains in South America. Anne felt she had no choice but to listen because the friend had invited Anne for dinner specifically to tell her about the trip. Anne appeared to listen agreeably, although she was bored and even angry. I asked her why she had accepted the invitation in the first place if she didn’t want to spend the evening hearing about the trip. "I don’t know," she replied. "I couldn’t imagine turning it down. After all, this friend has spent a lot of time listening to me bitch and moan about my job."

"And so you set aside your own desire to spend the evening quietly at home?" I inquired.

"Actually, no," Anne said. "You see, I didn’t know how resentful I really felt until I was sitting there, feeling under her control with no chance of going home. Of course, I couldn’t tell her how I felt. I would never say something that sounds so rejecting to a friend. I wouldn’t want to hurt her feelings."

To her friend it appeared that Anne chose to spend the evening together, but Anne had actually felt coerced by her own compulsion to be desirable. In order to make a choice, Anne had to have at least two options. Being free to choose means having alternatives, and in this case Anne would have needed to feel that she could say no in order to give a truthful yes. No one but Anne can make such a personal choice, but she has unknowingly refused to make it and so feels herself to be under the power of another.

Anne's compulsion to appear agreeable unintentionally leads her to deceive her friend. Like most of us Anne wants to appear supportive of others and their needs, but she does not take full responsibility even for this desire. If Anne really wanted to appear supportive, then her decision to go to her friend's would be freely given. But because Anne's compulsion to be desirable is hidden from her, she feels robbed of her power and control in the presence of her friend. The hidden compulsion to be wanted puts us under a sort of magic spell that makes our behavior confusing to others, even to ourselves. We seem to have chosen to be in a situation—a dinner party, a committee meeting, even a marriage—but we feel as though we had no choice, so we are there resentfully, holding in our negative emotions with arms crossed and a plastered smile sealing our lips.

What Do Women Really Want?

THE QUESTION What do women really want? is often attributed to Sigmund Freud, but as far as I know its first formal appearance is in a medieval folktale titled "The Marriage of Sir Gawain and the Lady Ragnell," whose earliest recorded version is from the thirteenth century. Its origin likely goes back further than this version because elements of its plot and themes show up in other folktales and literature in England (such as "The Wife of Bath’s Tale" from Chaucer's Canterbury
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Tales) and throughout Europe, indicating that it was widely known by the thirteenth or fourteenth century. Since then it has been told and retold in many forms throughout the world.

The following rendition most closely resembles a modern retelling published in The Maid of the North: Feminist Folk Tales from Around the World, edited by Ethel Johnston Phelps. Phelps selected stories in which the female characters, especially the heroines, contrast with those of the traditional fairy tales and folktales that are commonly told to us as children. On the one hand, the heroines of our most popular children’s tales, like Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, are known mostly for their beauty, grace, or generosity—and their submissiveness to Prince Charming. The tales chosen by Phelps, on the other hand, portray women as strong, capable, and resourceful, as well as hardworking and self-determining.

GAWAIN AND THE LADY RAGNELL

One day, King Arthur was out hunting a great white stag at the edge of the oak woods when he looked up and found himself confronted by a tall, powerful chieftain, swinging his sword and appearing as if he would cut down the king on the spot. This man was Sir Gromer, who declared that he was seeking revenge for the loss of some of his northern lands to Arthur. Since Arthur was unarmed, Sir Gromer showed the king mercy and gave him a chance to save his life.

Gromer issued a challenge: the king had one year to return unarmed to this spot with an answer to the question What do women desire above all else? If Arthur answered the question correctly, his life would be spared; if not, he would lose his head.

Arthur agreed, but he was very discouraged. This must be a trick question, he thought. He felt certain that no one knew

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the answer. Back at the castle Arthur told the entire story to his nephew Sir Gawain, who was known as the wisest, bravest, most compassionate and courteous of all the Knights of the Round Table. The young knight, in contrast to the king, was hopeful. He and Arthur had a year to search the kingdom, and he was certain they would find the right answer.

Almost a year passed, and Arthur and Gawain collected many answers, but not one had the ring of truth. The appointed day was almost upon them when one morning Arthur rode out alone through the purple heather and golden gorse, deep in thought about his predicament. At the edge of the oak woods, he was suddenly confronted by a large, grotesque woman who was covered with warts and almost as wide as she was tall.

Her eyes met his fearlessly as she declared, "You are Arthur, the king, and in two days you must meet Sir Gromer with an answer to a question."

"Yes," Arthur replied hesitantly, "but how do you know about this?"

"I am the Lady Ragnell, and Sir Gromer is my stepbrother. You don't have the right answer, do you?"

"I have many answers, and I don't see how it concerns you," Arthur retorted, gathering his reins to turn and ride home.

"You do not have the right answer," said Ragnell with a confidence that filled Arthur with gloom. "I have the answer."

Arthur turned and leaped off his horse. "Tell me the answer and I will give you a large bag of gold!"

"I have no use for gold," Ragnell replied calmly.

"Nonsense, woman, you can buy anything you want with it! What do you want, then? Jewelry, land? Whatever you want, I will pay you—that is, if you have the right answer."
"I know the answer. I can promise you that," responded Ragnell. After a slight pause she added, "I demand in return that Sir Gawain become my husband."

Arthur gasped. "Impossible!" he shouted. "You ask the impossible, woman. I cannot give you my nephew. He's his own man, not mine to give!"

"I did not ask you to give me the knight Gawain. If Gawain agrees to marry me of his own free will, then I will give you the answer. Those are my terms."

"Terms! What right do you have to give me terms? It's impossible! I could never bring him such a proposal."

Ragnell stared calmly at the king's face and simply said, "If you should change your mind, I will be here tomorrow." Then she disappeared into the woods.

Shaken from this strange encounter, Arthur rode home at a slow pace, thinking to himself that he could never speak to Gawain of this matter. The loathsome woman! How dare she ask for the finest knight in marriage! But the afternoon air was soft, and the fateful meeting with Gromer weighed heavily on Arthur. When the king returned to the castle, he found himself telling his nephew about his adventure, concluding, "She knows the answer, I'm sure of it—but I didn't intend to tell you any of this."

Gawain smiled sweetly, not yet knowing Ragnell's specific proposal. "But this is good news, Uncle. Why do you sound so discouraged?"

With his eyes averted, the king reported Ragnell's demand, along with a detailed description of her grotesque face, warty skin, and bulging size.

"How fortunate that I can save your life!" replied Gawain immediately. Over his uncle's protests Gawain stated, "It is my choice and my decision. I will return with you tomorrow and agree to the marriage, on the condition that her answer saves your life."

Early the next morning Gawain rode out with Arthur to meet the Lady Ragnell. Even seeing her face-to-face did not shake Gawain's resolve. Her proposal was accepted, and Gawain bowed to her courteously. "If tomorrow your answer saves the king's life, we shall be wed."

On the fateful morning Gawain rode out part of the way with Arthur, who assured the knight that he would try all the other answers first.

The tall, powerful chieftain was waiting for Arthur, his broadsword gleaming in the sun. As Arthur read out one answer after another, Gromer shouted, "No! No! No!" until at last he raised his sword high above his head. "Wait!" the king cried. "I have one more answer. What a woman desires above all else is the power of sovereignty, the right to exercise her own free will."

With a loud oath Gromer dropped his sword to his side. "You didn't find that answer on your own! My cursed stepsister Ragnell gave it to you! I'll cut off her head. I'll run her through with my sword!" He turned and plunged back into the forest, a string of curses echoing after him.

Arthur returned to where Gawain waited with the Lady Ragnell. All three rode back to the castle in silence. Only Ragnell seemed in good spirits.

The news spread quickly through the castle that a bizarre wedding was to take place between an ugly hag and the magnificent Gawain. No one could imagine what had persuaded Gawain to marry this creature. Some thought she must possess great lands and estates. Others thought she must have
some secret magic. Most were just stunned at the fate of poor Gawain.

King Arthur drew his nephew aside. "A postponement might be in order," he said.

"I gave her my promise, Uncle. Would you have me break my word?" Gawain replied.

So the wedding took place in the abbey, and the strange wedding feast was held before the entire court. Throughout the long day and evening, Gawain remained pleasant and courteous. In no way did he show anything but kind attention to his bride.

At last the wedding couple retired to their chamber. "You have kept your promise well and faithfully," Ragnell observed. "You've shown me neither pity nor revulsion. Come kiss me now that we are wedded."

Gawain went to her at once and kissed her. When he stepped aside before him stood a serene, beautiful woman with gray eyes and a smiling face. His scalp tingled with shock, and he jumped back. "What manner of sorcery is this?"

Ragnell replied, "Do you prefer me in this form?" as she turned slowly in a full circle.

"Yes, of course, but I don't understand," stammered Gawain, confused and frightened.

"My stepbrother Gromer has always hated me. He obtained a knowledge of sorcery from his mother and used it to change me into a monstrous hag. He commanded me to live in that shape until the finest knight in Britain willingly chose me as his bride."

"But why did he hate you so cruelly?" asked Gawain.

With her lips curled in amusement, Ragnell stated, "He thought me bold and unwomanly because I refused his commands, for both my property and my person."

With great admiration Gawain said, "Then you have won the impossible condition, and his evil spell is broken!"

"Only in part, my dear Gawain." Her eyes held his steadily. "You have a choice which way I will be. Would you have me in this, my own shape, at night in our chamber? Or would you have me grotesque in our chamber at night and my own shape by day in the castle? Fair by night, or fair by day—think carefully before you choose."

Gawain knelt before his bride and responded at once. "It is a choice I cannot make. It concerns you, my dear Ragnell, and only you can choose. Whatever you choose, I will willingly abide by it."

Ragnell released a long, deep breath. The radiance in her face overwhelmed him.

"You have answered well, dearest Gawain. Your answer has broken Gromer's evil spell completely. The last condition he set was that, after the marriage, the greatest knight in Britain, my husband, must give me the power of sovereignty, the right to exercise my own free will. Only then would the wicked enchantment be broken forever."

And so in wonder and joy began the marriage of Sir Gawain and the Lady Ragnell.

Hag Psychology and the Mythical Dangers of Female Desire

THIS ANCIENT STORY holds dimensions of meaning that are much deeper than its entertaining surface. It is a tale not only about self-determination and self-confidence in women but also about the confinement of a traditional patriarchal marriage, which, when the story was set down in written text, required by law that a woman surrender her freedom and
property to her husband. Indeed, I am certain that this folktale was told as a warning to women and men about the psychological and interpersonal dangers of a condition that eliminated a woman's personal sovereignty.

In the medieval period, when the tale originated, the power of the mythical hag to rob people of their vitality was well-known to audiences. The hag was said to ride the bodies of men and children at night while they were sleeping, absorbing their vigor into herself. In the morning her victims would wake to feeble will and lifeless gloom. Her kiss was her most potent weapon. Getting close to her lips meant risking having your soul sucked out. A medieval audience would have appreciated Gawain's courage in kissing his bride so directly. They would also have guessed that he performed this act without hesitation because he sensed Ragnell's true nature. He would have been thought to have seen beyond her appearance in order to trust that she was not really a destructive hag who would exhaust and dominate him.

Stories about the evil power of the hag were one way that earlier societies demeaned and demonized female power. Portraying female power as devitalizing, overwhelming, poisonous — especially for unsuspecting men and children—encouraged a belief in a negative emotional spell that could be cast exclusively by a demanding woman.

Today when women want to be wanted they unintentionally reinforce the misogynist belief that a demanding woman is to be dreaded and subdued. When we act as though our desires are too powerful and can overtake another's free will or good sense, we reinvent the negative psychology of the hag-bitch. We are at risk of identifying ourselves and our desires with an alien, almost superhuman emotional power.

When Anne, for example, prefaces her own needs or wants with phrases such as "Do you mind if I . . ." or "It would be so nice if you . . . ," she implies that she wants something especially burdensome or difficult that cannot be stated directly. When we cloak our desires in niceties and seductions, we protect ourselves from being known directly and imply that others must always be nice to us. This kind of eggshell quality of female desire suggests that our needs must be hidden, that they are dangerous.

In therapy sessions I often remind people that direct requests for reassurance, appreciation, even compliments are necessary when the need is urgent. Women frequently challenge me, saying, "That spoils the effect. People should just give these things spontaneously." My response is that there are no shoulds when it comes to such interpersonal supports, and that clear and direct communication avoids the indirect message that others must intuit our desires. Attempting to evoke responses from others without claiming one's needs not only is confusing but carries the hidden meaning of danger—that something is so troubling it cannot be put into words.

It is only when we speak directly, with a secure self-confidence, that we step outside this negative meaning of female desire. Recognizing our desires as human-size (rather than monstrous) means that we can speak about them calmly and clearly. Although she was doomed to be a loathsome lady, Ragnell knew that her needs and desires were acceptable. She made her demands to King Arthur in a way that showed confidence in herself and her knowledge that Gawain had a choice in responding to her. She did not apologize, nor did she blame. She spoke boldly from her heart.
But, as many women have pointed out to me, Ragnell does not win her freedom all by herself. She has to conform to the conditions set by her stepbrother: that the greatest knight in all of Britain must agree to marry her, and that this knight, her husband, must grant her the power of her own sovereignty, the right to make her own choices. For some readers these conditions seem to diminish Ragnell's accomplishments. But we should not be too literal in our understanding of this tale.

The story of Ragnell symbolizes the development of a woman's self-determination within the confines of a patriarchal tradition that demanded that she give up her rights and property after she married. Ragnell has to depend on men in power to assist her in becoming a free agent, but that is not so different from our situation today. At no point is Ragnell passive, compliant, or indirect. She defies her stepbrother and finds a way to meet his conditions. She even confronts the king, telling him that he does not know what a woman desires. She watches her new husband carefully, and she skillfully presents her challenge to be taken seriously (to kiss her) at a moment when it is likely to be most effective. And, ultimately, she is aware that she cannot become self-determining without relying on others; she poses her questions to Gawain to test him, to see if he has grasped the fundamental dilemma of her life.

Ragnell symbolizes a process through which a woman claims the authority to be her own person, to command her own actions. When we first meet her, she is the dreaded hag-bitch, the symbol of the emotionally demanding woman. Yet we can tell that she is something more, for even the king is convinced of her wisdom. As the story progresses we are won over by her courage and good humor. We are pleased that she will not be humiliated or subdued by the opinions of others. And finally, when Gawain comes forward to kiss her, we believe that he also senses something different about her. Of course he is startled by her transformation, as are we. What of this transformation? Not until Gawain kneels before her and answers well do we fully understand that she has been transformed not by his kiss but by the process of her own courage in pursuing her freedom and confronting her new husband.

By example, Ragnell shows us how to respond to the constraints of patriarchy in order to become a self-determining woman. First, she keeps her own counsel in the face of challenge. Although by all standards she is ugly, she is unconcerned about her appearance and definite in her stance. She is who she is. She speaks from her own authority in challenging her stepbrother and the king. She feels free to arrange her life according to her desires, even though she may be at risk for retaliations. She is knowledgeable about her desire for personal sovereignty, and she will not be discouraged by spells cast on her, insults, or rejections. She will not have her motives demeaned, even by the king.

The False Power of the Muse

To UNDERSTAND WHY, many hundreds of years later, it is still such a struggle for women to follow Ragnell's lead, we need to look more closely at the curse of her stepbrother, Gromer, who thought Ragnell was too bold and unwomanly in refusing his commands. She was a threat to his male dominance, the prototype of the uppity woman. So her stepbrother turned her into his image of that threat—an ugly, frightening hag, an emasculating bitch. His wish was that Ragnell would stay that
way forever, but her self-determination was more than Gromer had bargained for. She stepped outside his spell in commanding her own life.

This move to shame female desire by turning it into the image of a hag-bitch is matched by a countermove to elevate female beauty and grace into positions of purported power. If female desire is stifled through male dominance, how can women be attracted to fill their designated roles as wife or mother, as worker or lover? They are promised other means for attaining power, means that remain under male control. *Female power is beauty* is the refrain that influences young women everywhere to believe that they will have influence and status if they employ the "right" images.

Throughout the centuries of patriarchal art and literature, we find a recurring image of the desire-awakening maiden (to be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter), who is portrayed as the exact opposite of the devitalizing hag. This muse is the essence of vitality and life, whereas the hag is the essence of suffocation and death.

Today's muse appears in the form of an anorectic woman-child. Her image is girlish or waiflike, with a blank stare. It's hard to imagine that she is meant to be enlivening and arousing, but there is no doubt that she is the blueprint for fashion and female beauty in the contemporary world, emulated by young women everywhere. Her principal roles in our culture are supermodel, ingenue, celebrity, and movie star. Whatever her form at any cultural moment, though, the muse stirs fascination, inspiration, and procreation in her male admirers and, by extension, in all of us.

But the muse is not her own person. She is always under the control of her master: he is the Subject and she is the Object of Desire. A woman who identifies with being the Object of Desire is not a source of her own inspiration; she does not feel as though her life belongs to her. Her vitality and imagination, her efforts and plans, are directed toward the desires of others, toward being desirable as the anorectic woman-child, the lovely lady, the self-sacrificing mother. To be the Object of Desire means to have no core self, no clear autonomy and self-determination that are under your command. Ragnell, even in her beautiful form, is no muse because she is the Subject of her own desires.

By contrast, being the Subject of your own desires does not preclude having an attractive appearance or a pleasant manner. But appearance, manner, niceness, self-sacrifice are never the central motivators for the woman who is a Subject. She—like Ragnell—speaks confidently and clearly even in the face of challenge, conflict, and her own anxiety. Because she wants to be known for who she is, instead of how she appears, she is straightforward and direct.

Why, then, in spite of the recent waves of feminism, do we continue to worship the muse? Because we continue to believe that female power is unhealthy and overwhelming—a kind of soul-sucking danger that needs to be warded off by women and men alike. So we unconsciously support the male fantasy that the only *legitimate* power to be encouraged in girls and women is to be the Object of Desire.

Women and men alike dread the hag-bitch. Women do not want to be identified as too demanding, pushy, bossy. We do not want to be known as the type who intimidates others with ultimatums, demands, or needs that might overwhelm. In our rush away from the hag-bitch, we move toward the muse and her false power as the Object of Desire. Although she appears to promise that female power is beauty, she denies a woman the right to her own sovereignty. The muse always remains under
the control of the master; it is the master's life that is enhanced and completed through her inspiration.

Nowhere can we see this more clearly than in Diana, Princess of Wales, the cultural muse of our time. Diana is the embodiment of a collective Object of Desire, a muse for the contemporary world. We used her image to inspire and excite us. Our hunger for her vitalizing effects is the crucial aspect of Diana's public appeal, in both her life and her death.

Diana herself was tragically caught in the female-power-is-beauty belief. Witness her much-maligned fate: to be pursued relentlessly by publicists, photographers, and a public who felt that she belonged to them, and whom she courted tirelessly in her quest for stardom. Diana obsessively maintained a slender appearance, leading at one point to an eating disorder in which she vomited up to four times a day. Even after she had overcome this dangerous condition, she carefully controlled her diet and exercise. She was fateful, desperately motivated by wanting to be wanted.

The ultimate Object of Desire, Diana sought romantic relationships with untrustworthy partners, starting with the Prince of Wales. She may have been loved to some degree by each of her suitors, but their motives were mixed at best. Most of all they wanted her for what she symbolized rather than for the person she was. They used the power of her appearance, and her difficulties with self-esteem, to their own advantage and status. They did not return that power to her, as Gawain did to Ragnell. Diana was cursed as a muse as Ragnell was cursed as a hag. And, as we will see, the curse of the muse is often the more devastating: although the hag may not be wanted, or even loved, she can know her own desires if she chooses. The muse cannot, for as soon as she does, she ceases to be the muse.

Diana is a symbol of female desire at the end of the twentieth century. She portrays the conflict and confusion, shame and fascination of potentially liberated women trying to be Objects of Desire. We haunted her with our need to live vicariously through her, to be enlivened by her, until the tragic accident of her death expressed how brutally high the stakes are in this game. Tragically, Diana will always remain an Object of Desire—tragically because at the time of her death she was beginning to move toward the goal of claiming her own desires.

A Matter of Heart

DURING AND AFTER her divorce, Diana spoke out truthfully and became a role model for other women who, in hearing about her personal struggles, seemed to feel a promise of release from their own shame and family secrets. As psychologist Carol Gilligan remarked, "In breaking out so publicly from an imprisonment of silence enforced by shame, Diana discovered that in speaking from her heart, she touched the hearts of others. Rather than shunning her, people embraced her. Because she felt psychologically homeless and shunned, she could reach out without the shadow of condescension to those who were physically homeless and to people shunned because of AIDS and leprosy." Admitting her vulnerabilities while maintaining her image of the desire-awakening maiden, Diana cracked open the belief that beauty alone can protect even a fairy-tale princess. Yet because of her untimely death, Diana may be remembered more for her beauty—that "effervescent, bubbly intoxication," as one reporter put it—than for her final courageous refusal to hide in shame and silence, unless we change our understanding of female desire.
Speaking the truth, as Diana had begun to do, is the only path out of the superficiality and false promises of wanting to be wanted to the possibilities of being loved. If wanting to be wanted is a matter of image, then wanting to be loved is a matter of heart. Being loved is being known in our own fallible, open, true spirit. As Ragnell shows us, being true to yourself does not mean judging or blaming or letting your tongue roll with nasty, accusatory words. Rather, it means speaking your own thoughts and feelings with respect for others, without trying to cover up the harsh bits or the rough edges in order to keep your image shiny and clean.

When we live by the truth, we discover what constitutes not only our individual nature but also our fundamental humanity. Yet speaking the truth can expose us to criticism and judgment, and most of all to our own fears about the nature of our desires. Admitting who we are and what we want, recognizing our dependence and gratitude, puts us in a vulnerable position. We learn that human strengths and abilities are always limited by weakness, tiredness, forgetfulness, bad habits, and other imperfections. These innate limitations awaken us to the ways we need others and compel us to appreciate how we are helped and sustained by our relationships. Hiding from the truth leads only to the opposite: anxious self-protectiveness, isolation, fear, and shame.

Hiding in the Woods

All of us struggle with shame, hiding ourselves and our needs because they seem to be wrong or bad. Diana’s eating disorder was at its worst during the time she felt shamed by the rejection of her husband in favor of his mistress. Unconsciously she attempted to control those feelings by obsessively controlling her body, appearing to be slender while consuming huge amounts of food. She hid from herself and the world the ways in which she felt empty and hungry, wanting to be filled by someone else’s desire.

The woods where the Lady Ragnell lived as a hag can be understood as a symbol of shame—a place where we hide when we feel our identity or desires are bad. Although Ragnell does not express the feeling of shame, we can imagine that she lived a lonely, isolated life as the hag in the woods, awaiting a time when she could step forward. Women who identify with being the hag-bitch—the negatively powerful woman—almost always hide because they feel ashamed.

Shame is an emotion that expresses the desire to hide, disappear, or even die because we fear that the self is empty, bad, or inferior. When we are ashamed it feels as though nothing can be done about it, because shame is linked to a sense of being, not something that we're doing. If you believe you can-not do anything about feeling that there is something wrong with who you are, then it makes sense that you would try to protect yourself from being exposed. When we feel ashamed all kinds of deceits and lies arise in us to provide a protective cover.

When I think of Ragnell’s woods as a symbol of shame, I think of women hiding in unsatisfactory, sometimes uncommitted, even cruel and abusive relationships. In such a shame-based environment, women are intimidated by name-calling, betrayal, threats of violence, and actual violence, which are often interpreted as indicating that something is terribly wrong with the women themselves. I also think of the more ordinary problem of a man who says to his female partner, “I just need more space, some time away from you so that I can get my thoughts together.” This kind of statement implies that the woman sucks up the space between them, filling it with her overwhelming
presence. In this example the image of the soul-sucking hag creeps into what many regard as an egalitarian dialogue between the sexes—rationalized by pop psychology about a man's need to separate himself from a woman in order to possess himself, as though the woman's presence prevents that experience.

When Cheryl began psychotherapy with me, she was thirty-three years old, single, very intelligent, well-educated, and working as a partner in a mostly male law firm in Philadelphia. Of medium height, she weighed about 145 pounds and felt very ashamed of her weight and her body. Although she was muscular and healthy, she constantly felt that something was wrong with the way she looked. Cheryl was romantically involved with Brad, who was twenty-five, good-looking, energetic, less educated, and extremely noncommittal. They had been involved for about a year, and things were not going well. But Cheryl didn't want to talk about their relationship. She wanted to talk about herself, because she was afraid something was really wrong with her. As had Princess Diana, Cheryl was choosing men who eventually betrayed her, sexually or financially. Before Brad she had fallen for two other men who quickly professed love for her, promptly moved into her apartment, and soon began to take advantage of her high income and low self-esteem.

Cheryl wanted to get married and start a family but had no idea how to go about it. She did not want to "pressure" Brad, who was still finishing college. In fact, she did not even want to speak about her desires to Brad, because she feared bringing up marriage and family would scare him away. Cheryl said she just wanted to appear to be "hanging out" with Brad in a relaxed and open way so that he could see that she wasn't the type of woman to pressure him.

After Cheryl had been in therapy with me for about two years, living off and on with Brad, she finally confronted him: she was no longer willing to wait for him to make up his mind. She wanted him to commit to a long-term relationship, with marriage in tow, or she would move on. In spite of her forceful declaration, however, Cheryl was not fully convinced of her worth and attractiveness. Undermined by feelings of shame about her body and afraid that no man would choose her, Cheryl blurted out complaints and blame. She said she was "disgusted" that Brad had stayed with her for so many years without making any promises about their future. Instead of speaking responsibly, she blamed Brad for making her feel so bad about herself. Her feelings of shame had kept her in the woods too long.

Unconsciously Cheryl acted out Brad's worst image of the hag-bitch: the power-hungry monster who cannot be satisfied. This fantasy of the dangerous hag depends on the belief that her demands and desires are endless, voracious, consuming. When women identify with shame, they believe that they are empty or worthless and turn to others to fill them up with supports and reassurances. As long as shame is primary in a woman's identity, nothing will fill the void; shame is like a vacuum or black hole that cannot hold the compliments and reassurances that are offered.

Cheryl gave Brad two weeks to make up his mind, but Brad turned her down after two days. Naturally, Cheryl was angry, bereft, and somewhat inclined to blame me and her therapy for compelling her to speak directly and "spoil" her relationship. Gradually, Cheryl and I examined the beliefs and fantasies that linked her to the feeling of shame. We discovered why she had been attracted to so many elusive and irresponsible men over
the years and why she still longed to be shown that she was not a bitchy woman who spoiled a man's space or destroyed his soul.

As we went through this process, Cheryl learned more about her psychological complexes, the name Carl Jung gave to the emotional tendencies we all have to protect ourselves in the same ways we did in childhood, to imagine a world that is filled with the dangers we sensed and encountered in our original families. These complexes are unconscious and semi-conscious tendencies to act out emotional dramas that may or may not be known to us, fueled by habits acquired in our dependency bonds from infancy and childhood, with parents and siblings.

When Cheryl faced Brad directly with her desires, she feared he would say she was not physically attractive to him. She also feared he would blame her for being unfair to him, for wanting too much, despite the fact that she had been endlessly fair and generous. This made sense only when we discovered that Cheryl had been both attracted to and intimidated by her unpredictable father when she was a child. A charming Bad Boy, her father was also a prominent lawyer who was outwardly respected by the community. He was a "street angel" and a "house devil," as Cheryl put it. A womanizer, Cheryl's father humiliated his wife and blamed her for his failure to feel love for her after the first years of their marriage.

Cheryl witnessed many fights between her parents but felt more critical of her mother's passivity than of her father's accusations. Cheryl wanted her mother to stand up to her father and claim her own worth. Cheryl determined that she would win her father's love and praise by emulating him. She sought his approval by excelling at school in the subjects he loved and by developing a social charm that matched his. She won his admiration and interest to such an extent that eventually she felt as though her father's responses to her, his love and praise, were under her control. If he failed to notice her or remark on an accomplishment, she would believe that she must be at fault. Her "power" over him was that of the Object of Desire; she imagined that she controlled him through her actions, image, and accomplishments. This was the father complex that Cheryl re-created with Brad and her other lovers: unconsciously she wanted to be the exclusive Object of Desire, the longed-for companion who would perfectly meet the needs of the man.

Her energies would first be directed to making the man feel good about himself and at home in her life. Then she would seek to be approved and admired for her intelligence and attractiveness. Because she felt ashamed of her body, Cheryl believed that she had to work extra hard at being accommodating and pleasing, so that her partner would remain physically attracted to her. When her partner's interest seemed to wane, Cheryl would try to do something special—to make a particularly good meal or give a nice gift—in order to keep him involved.

Psychological complexes compel us, as they compelled Cheryl, to repeat the emotional themes from childhood, especially in our adult partnerships and parenting. Unless we become conscious of these complexes, they rule us through subjective impulses and images that seem to be reality. Complexes are the psychological karma that we bring with us from our families of origin. We came by them honestly, when we were dependent on others for survival and sustenance. They are triggered in our adult lives not only by certain emotional meanings but also by any stimuli—sounds, tastes, touch, smells, physical states (such as nausea)—familiar from the original contexts that endangered or overstimulated us.
When our complexes are hidden from our awareness, they can become monstrous, dampening our vitality and motivation. The experience of pervasive discontent and a futile kind of inner emptiness are symptoms of hidden complexes in their uglier forms. Unacknowledged longings and fears manifest themselves as strong drives that may appear in dreams and fantasies as demons, snakes, floods, earthquakes, threatening intruders, or hungry ghosts who could consume us. They may appear in waking life as addictions and compulsions that make no logical sense. Indeed, one way to interpret the monstrous hag hiding in the woods is as women's unconscious complex of female power that can be civilized and refined only when it is listened to, examined, and brought out into the light of day.

So Cheryl discovered what had bound her to irresponsible men: she was attracted to men like her father, whom she then idealized and tried to please, failing to notice where they were limited, wrong, or even bad. She would take all the responsibility for what went wrong in the relationships and increase her shame, believing that something was fundamentally wrong with her while overlooking the failures and mistakes of her partners.

Today, some five years later, Cheryl is married to a man very different from Daddy. He is a successful lawyer, like Cheryl and her father, but he and Cheryl have a relationship of mutual involvement and friendship. Together they work as professional mediators in divorce and separation cases. Cheryl now teaches other women and men to speak the truth in the context of respect and fairness.

Cheryl's loss of Brad opened the way for a new development. She learned the lesson that Ragnell hints at when she says to Arthur, "I did not ask you to give me the knight Gawain. If Gawain agrees to marry me of his own free will. . . ." This is the lesson of knowing the boundaries and limitations of your desire and power. When you learn to speak the truth, you come to recognize that you have no special power over others to make them do your bidding. You cannot pressure or scare away others by speaking your desires. Other adults also have free will. We all have a responsibility to speak our own desires and to respect those of others. When you speak the truth directly, you come to know the possibilities and limitations of being the Subject of Desire. For women this means overcoming our fears of being seen as the hag-bitch in order to say clearly and fully what we want without either demanding that we get it or believing that we have taken control of another.

The Subject of Desire

Either because of ignorance of the actual meaning of self-determination or because of the magic spell cast by wanting to be wanted, we women often misunderstand or forget that our deepest desire is for sovereignty over our own lives, the right and responsibility to act with free will—to be the Subjects of our own desires. This is true of all human beings, no matter their condition. It is only within the framework of such personal sovereignty that the kinder face of desire can shine and develop, through the responsibility and self-determination to live in a compassionate, conscious manner.

Being the Subject of your desires means not just asserting what you want but taking responsibility for your desires as well. These are closely related but different issues. Whereas being assertive means clearly stating your own needs and desires,
taking responsibility carries the additional meaning of answering for yourself, choosing ethically, and being trustworthy. Taking responsibility is the step that follows being assertive. For instance, in therapy clients sometimes say something like "I spoke to my partner about my need for greater reassurance and closeness, and he said, 'Okay. So what am I supposed to do about that?" I was just furious. Obviously he doesn't care at all how I feel."

"So what did you say after he said that?" I ask calmly. The most frequent answer is 'Nothing. The conversation was over because he just doesn't get it. I have nothing more to say.' The speaker has put the responsibility on the listener to take the conversation forward, but the speaker is the person with the desire. To responsibly handle such a problem, the speaker should continue to communicate her desire.

Being responsible means trying again and again in different ways to say what you want, until it can be heard and understood. If you are trapped in a psychological complex, in feeling that (for example) you are never heard or understood, then you will have to develop a great deal of patience and tolerance in order to take responsibility for your desire and not blame another for failing you before you have fully tried. This tolerance is like a meditative discipline in conversation—breathe deeply and calmly return to the subject at hand. Like Ragnell, be confident that you can speak from your knowledge of your-self. If all else fails, simply and sincerely say something like 'Those are my needs (or conditions), and when you are ready to talk about them, please let me know.'

Being the Subjects of our desires means taking on the challenging, nuanced experience of learning who we are, charting the many layers of our subjective lives, and being accountable for them. Through this process we come to know how we are limited by conditions and happenings beyond our control. As we take responsibility for our own desires, we discover how much we depend on others, and how often we may be mistaken or wrong in wanting certain things. The tolerance we develop for our own mistakes and blind spots spreads out to being tolerant of shortcomings in others, especially those we love.

So how can we claim the validity of our desires without fear of repercussions and shame? How can we use our desires to attain self-knowledge and self-determination, to take responsibility for ourselves and become more authentic in our relations to others? Can we reach a place where our desires no longer drive us and we are content?

Ragnell's story provides us with some preliminary clues, and Diana's death is a cautionary tale. Wanting to be wanted is often a completely hidden desire, confused with wanting to be loved. In order to avoid the temptation to become the Object of Desire, we have to learn to oppose our tendencies to present an image. We must actively claim what we want, even if doing so puts us at risk of being labeled as the hag-bitch. With a confidence in our knowledge, we can firmly and calmly show that we don't fear female desire, that we want to be free from the dominance of appearance and its false power. Until women refuse to live by the belief that female power is beauty, we will be unable to reach the next level of our development, an ability to know and sustain our own truths in all domains of our existence.

The Truth of Being Known

TRUTH IS A WAY OF LIFE, not something that exists outside ourselves. It's being honest and direct and transparent, as well as wholly respectful of those we depend on to sustain us. If
our attention is focused on how we look or seem to others, we will find it impossible to know our own hearts. If we become Objects of Desire, we can easily forget how to be Subjects of our own desires. Either we attend to our images, trying to make hidden and implied arrangements for things to go our way, or we attend to our desires and let the chips fall, no matter how we are received.

The Renaissance metaphysician Paracelsus said that we cannot love something without knowing it, or know something without loving it. When we feel deeply loved, we also know that we have been encountered authentically, that we have been true to ourselves in the presence of the other and found that truth fully embraced and accepted. When we tell the truth to a partner or friend, we are indeed vulnerable to being judged, blamed, or rejected. If we hide the truth in favor of protecting ourselves and appearing in a certain way, however, we may retain an illusion of control but we lose the possibility of being known for who we really are, and hence of being loved.

In writing this book it is my goal to illuminate the rocky path from the hidden compulsion to be desired to the responsibility for our own desires, and finally to the knowledge and wisdom that arise from seeing into our limitations and dependence. When we no longer cling to being seen in a particular way and learn to speak the truth with an open heart, we find that almost nothing seems impossible—not because we are in control of everything but because we discover how to depend gratefully on others, how to change when change is required, and, most important, how to be less ashamed, envious, guilty, isolated, and afraid.