Burning Dinners: Feminist Subversions of Domesticity

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One of my favorite childhood rituals was Sabbath dinner at my grandparents' house. Our tribe of close-knit cousins would pass the time before dinner playing in gleeful abandon in the sparsely furnished dining room, paying scant attention to the preparation of food for which our services were not required. By the time we were called to the table, my grandfather would be carving the roast chicken or the brisket of beef, and so it is my grandfather's image that sustains my recollection of those meals. Only as an adult did I learn that this image was more apt than I realized, for my grandfather apparently not only carved but also cooked those roasts. My grandmother, my father told me, was not much of a cook.

I do not know how to code or uncoded actions Sabbath dinners became my grandfather's turf: whether my grandmother made excuses to avoid preparing them, botched meals until my grandfather stepped in, or simply bowed (as one aunt recently suggested) to a husband who loved to cook. I do not know whether my grandfather cooked other, less ceremonial dinners, nor do I know by what process I came to assume that my grandmother had cooked the Sabbath meals. My father insisted that his mother could not cook; remembering the woman who so often sat engrossed in her Yiddish books and took avid part in political and cultural organizations, I now imagine a woman who would not cook, a woman engaged in the subversive use of incompetence to extricate herself from a traditionally female performance that was not much to her taste.

If my grandmother did in fact avoid cooking dinners, then she was also avoiding an ideal of womanly competence that had changed little in her journey from the outskirts of Warsaw to the Chicago neighborhoods where she and her children raised their families. In the folklore of many cultures at least in Europe, the Middle East, and Euro-America, for several centuries and across situational differences, female competence seems to have been virtually coextensive with competence at domestic tasks. Consider, for example, the tales in which a man is instructed to choose a bride according to how carefully she can cut cheese or scrape the kneading trough, demonstrating at once her frugality and her skill; tales in which a woman gets a husband because she spins so well or makes a soup no one can replicate; ballads celebrating women who can bake cherry pie; and proverbs mapping the way to a man's heart.

Such definitions of women's value can be found in folklore from the ancient and sublime to the modern and obscene. At one extreme, there is the passage in the Hebrew Bible that equates "valiant woman" with capable wife: after thirty chapters on the diverse qualities that make men virtuous, the Book of Proverbs concludes (31:10–31) by detailing the virtues of women who labor skillfully from dawn to dark. At the other extreme, yet born of similar assumptions, are jokes like the one that posits the ideal wife as a lady in the parlor, an economist in the kitchen, and a prostitute in bed—or, in a far more vulgar formulation, the definition reproduced uncritically in a collection of urban folklore, of a wife as "a gadget you screw on the bed to get the housework done." Whether with admiration or contempt, then, the folklore of many cultures equates female value with domestic industry. An Israeli tale concludes with this typology: "And since then, until today, there have been three kinds of women. There are stupid, lazy, and obstinate women... There are bad, bickering, and shouting women... But happy is the man blessed with a clever, quiet, and diligent woman. She is the true daughter of Noah the Righteous One."

It is worth noting that this tale and many others, at least in their extant English translations, call on women to be "clever" as well as industrious. Associated in its early definitions with manual skill, the word clever retains its connection with neatness and dexterity rather than with pure intellect. This body of folklore does recognize the value of female intelligence so long as it is bounded by domestic purposes. Daughters and wives (like servants of both sexes) can sometimes even be smarter than the men around them, if they use their wit in the service of their duller relatives. "The Clever Peasant Girl" (AT 875) describes a set of tales from several European cultures in which a clever daughter solves a riddle to win riches for her family and sometimes a rich husband for herself. In one Israeli tale, a husband is so incompetent that he forgets which woman is his wife, but the wife's
intelligence protects the husband from harm. Although such a woman may trick her husband to demonstrate his foolishness, there is no question of her turning her superior intelligence to antipatriarchal ends; after all, as a neighbor woman counsels in the Israeli tale, “It is better to have a husband like that than no husband at all.”75 “Clever Else,” on the other hand, gets so tangled in abstraction that she cannot do the simplest chore competently. Sent downstairs for beer to serve the man who is courting her, she remains there for hours weeping that if she marries him, and they have a child, and the child comes down to the cellar, the axe sticking from the rafter will fall on him and kill him; later she agonizes over whether to work first or eat first; finally, she is not even certain who she is: “Is it me, or isn’t it me? . . . She did not know what to answer.”76 Here, a woman’s attempt at abstract thought turns “cleverness” to sad irony.

Indeed, the one exceptional tale I have encountered in which a woman’s wisdom seems to be permitted a nondomestic outlet finally ends up proving the old rule. Italo Calvino records the Italian tale of “Catherine the Wise,” in which a brilliant and learned young woman, grief-stricken over her mother’s death, is allowed by her shopkeeperfather to open her own school. The school is a kind of socialistfeminist democracy: “both boys and girls” are admitted free of charge and sit “side by side, without distinction. . . .”77 The coal merchant’s son must sit beside the prince’s daughter.” Catherine runs a rigorous classroom, and when “the prince himself decides to attend” and turns out to be a dunce, Catherine “deals him a back-handed blow.”78 The story takes a swerve when the enraged prince asks Catherine to marry him, she immediately accepts, and he ties her up and locks her in a pit because she refuses to repent the slap. The rest of the tale recounts episode after episode in which Catherine must use her intelligence to outwit her husband, escape from the traps he continues to set, and fool him entirely over a period of years, so that he keeps abandoning her and marrying a “new” princess, who is actually Catherine in disguise. Finally, all identities are revealed and the husband asks forgiveness, but Catherine’s school and scholarship are never mentioned again. Even in this anomalous story of a woman scholar, female intelligence is ultimately harnessed to domestic ends.

This rechanneling of a woman’s abilities suggests that domestic competence is not simply a part of the definition of female competence but virtually the whole of it. If female competence is domestic competence, the corollary is that in most areas that are not associated with domesticity, to be a “woman” is, traditionally speaking, to be (presumed) incompetent or minimally competent. As Joan N. Radner

and I note in “Strategies of Coding in Women’s Cultures,” male and female incompetence are often inversely defined, so that men may demonstrate their manhood when they boast of incompetence at precisely those behaviors that signal female capability—hence the proverbial husband who can’t sew on a button or boil an egg. Both women and men, of course, may reinforce this system; Patricia Andrews, for example, quoted in Ann Oakley’s Women’s Work, says of men’s participation in housework, “I’d rather do it myself, because they don’t do it properly anyway.”78 An entire tale-type (AT 1408) is devoted to stories about “The Husband Who Would Mind the House,” in which men and women reverse roles and the men turn out to be incompetent at domestic chores that they had refused even to define as work.

In cultures with oppositional definitions of masculine and feminine, it is not surprising that these domestic attributes that get defined as “+ female” also get defined as “– male,” just as the competencies designated “– male” are understood as “+ female.” But the structure of value associated with these oppositions is not wholly parallel because, as Simone de Beauvoir observes, men are not only the positive term in the sex-gender system but the neutral term as well. Thus, what is male is male, but what is human is also male, “as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general.”79 As a result, women’s success or failure at traditionally male tasks bears a negative charge: the stereotypes of the superfeminine woman who cannot change a tire and the unfeminine woman who can both be more equivocal than the image of the domestically incompetent or supercompetent man. A “real” woman does women’s work and not men’s work, just as a “real” man does men’s and not women’s work. So far, the parallels to men obtain. But a woman who cannot do men’s work is “only” a woman, while a man who cannot do women’s work is “not only” a man because in such a system there is nothing better than being a man. A man can, of course, do certain kinds of “domestic” work, like cooking or weaving, if he does it outside the home. Such professionalized activities are often distinguished linguistically: the “cook” and the “seamstress” are women, the “chef” and “tailor” men. Competence and incompetence thus participate as cultural values in a nexus of gender arrangements that delineate confining expectations for both sexes but leave women diminished in status and opportunity when they take the “appropriate” avenue.

Precisely because it is safe, indeed immensely serviceable as competencies go, domestic performance so validates a woman that it can mask or justify her appropriation of male turf. In Mary Wilkins
certain women get to be as incompetent as men, but their domestic incompetence only makes them more feminine. This is especially true in cultures where physical labor structures class (and thus often racial) differences. In the antebellum U.S. South, for example, domestic incompetence distinguished the white "lady" from her black slaves. Martha Hines, interviewed in the 1930s at the age of 102, recalls that during her slave days on a plantation owned by "good... white folks," the master did not allow the slaves to work on Sunday. Yet "lots of times we slaves would take turns on helping 'em serve Sunday meals just 'cause we liked them so much. We hated to see Missie fumbling round in the kitchen all out of her place." This kind of class and race complexity continues to structure domestic work, so that it remains entirely acceptable and is no sign of failed femininity for an upper-class woman to hire another woman, very likely a woman of color, to clean and maintain her house. Indeed, the status of (under)paid domestic labor in many, if not most, countries gives the lie to the alleged value of domestic competence; if domestic skill is what makes a woman worthy, it does not make her worthy of much.

Because domestic competence is ultimately of limited cultural value even though it is of urgent cultural necessity, and because so many societies still expect most women to share a common set of domestic interests and skills and to spend much of their time performing them, domesticity has surely become, at least for some women some of the time, a source of limitation, constraint, and downright misery. One would expect, therefore, to find in some traditional settings the traces of women's resistance to the tyranny of daily domestic demands. I am interested here especially in those traces that take the (coded) form of proclaimed or enacted incompetence, like the resistance in which I imagine my grandmother engaged—that is, what Radner and I describe in "Strategies of Coding" as claims or demonstrations of incompetence through which women extricate themselves from traditionally female responsibilities without openly refusing them.

Women claim incompetence when they assert that they cannot cook, bake, knit, sew, or keep a clean house (the latter often under the label "disorganized," since sweeping and scrubbing are usually considered unskilled labor within anyone's competence). Women demonstrate incompetence when they do one of these tasks poorly—leave it incomplete, neglect it, or spoil it in some way. Our hypothesis is that such performances may function as coded rejections not only of the task in question but also of a culturally constructed female role. Like all coded phenomena, strategic displays of incompetence are inevitably double-voiced and double-edged, but precisely for this reason.

Freeman's story "The Revolt of 'Mother'" (1891), a New England housewife takes over her husband's new barn after he reneges on his promise to build her a new house. In language that gives masculine status to her domestic accomplishments, Freeman makes Sarah a "masterly keeper of her box of a house," an "artist so perfect that he [sic] has apparently no art." In her moments of hottest resentment, Sarah still bakes her husband's favorite pies and painstakingly irons his shirts. What appears at first to be yet another enactment of a woman's silent, literally inconsequential resentment becomes instead the ground that justifies the takeover of Adoniram's barn. Sarah is presented as so skillful and industrious, so concerned for her home, that her daring appropriation of male space can be read as the perfection of her domesticity. Sarah's "mastery" is not only justification, then, but also coded distraction: surely a woman who keeps cooking and cleaning so dutifully cannot really be a threat. Both justification and distraction may also be operating in the behaviors of contemporary "superwomen" who succeed in traditionally male work spheres but are determined not to sacrifice a strand of the domestic enterprise. I thought of Freeman's story recently when I read a blurb in my physician's office listing her credentials in medicine and concluding with her marital status and the number and sex of her children. I recalled my inordinate pride at having sworn, during my first semester in graduate school, an extremely elaborate three-piece Halloween costume for the oldest of my three small sons.

While domestic ability is expected of all but the most privileged women, domestic competence is also, of course, constructed in terms of social class. In folktales, domestic competence may be so powerful that it allows women to cross class barriers. It is not only a servant girl's beauty but also her housewifery that can earn her marriage to a prince. Cinderella herself was as industrious as her stepisters were lazy, and in another Grimm's tale, a man marries the servant of his bride-to-be because she is a more industrious spinner than the bride. Such narratives stand, however, in cruel tension with social experience, for it is not the marriage of women servants but their seduction that pervades history. After all, a rich man does not have to marry competence to reap its benefits, and if the servant girl does get the prince, she will surely be freed from the domestic service for which the man allegedly married her.

Indeed, the ideal of domestic competence is exposed and complicated by class, for not all women have been expected to demonstrate the same degree of competence either in folktales or in life. In many cultures, domestic incompetence seems to be a sign of class status;
they allow a woman to say “I can’t” when she means but cannot say “I won’t.” The claim or enactment of incompetence does require the woman to declare herself a failure in traditional terms (which may be one of several reasons why women usually declare their incompetence only in selective areas), but the declaration also has a certain traditional savor because it plays on notions of female helplessness and delicacy like those associated with the upper-class white “lady” of the antebellum South. Besides, to fail at what is womanly, as Radner and I suggest, is in some cultural sense to be more like a man. In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston recalls that as a child she “refused to cook. When I had to wash dishes, I would crack one or two, ‘Bad girl,’ my mother yelled, and sometimes that made me gloat rather than cry. Isn’t a bad girl almost a boy?”

Given the weight of cultural ideology and the social and economic arrangements of traditional marriage, the open refusal of heterosexually married women to perform necessary domestic activities has been and perhaps still remains largely a luxury of class or circumstance. An acquaintance of mine, the widow of a renowned sculptor, recalls that as a new bride she received only one piece of advice from her mother-in-law: choose one domestic skill that you do not know how to do and never learn it, thereby exempting yourself from its performance for life. She chose laundry. There was, however, sufficient money to have the laundry sent out. I also knew a woman who had no stove; she bought her house without one and just never put one in. But she was a professional woman, divorced, and without children, and although her stovelessness may have annoyed the man with whom she was keeping company, she could afford to have a kitchen that screamed rebellion in this way. Where women are able to live in lesbian partnerships or in heterosexual relationships that do not subscribe to traditional domestic ideologies, domestic competence becomes another issue entirely. As humorist Gail Sausser writes of her lesbian household, “If the house gets too dirty, we throw a party. Everyone becomes motivated to vacuum, wash dishes and scrub sinks so others don’t think we are slobs.”

On the other hand, there are contexts in which even very selective refusals can be dangerous. In “Strategies of Coding,” Radner and I note the more circumscribed refusal documented in Brett Williams’s report of a divorce suit brought by an Illinois Mexican-American man on the grounds that his wife refused to cook tamales. Although what infuriated the husband was that the woman could make tamales but would not, probably a claim of incompetence would have been of no use at all, for the woman would simply have been told to learn from the other women in the community what any woman in her culture would be considered able to do. Indeed, Williams notes that the husband had “the full support of his wife’s kin as well as his own.”

The degree of privilege that even coded refusals entail is clearest when women bound to domestic work for a livelihood fail to do at home what they do successfully in the labor force. Juliet Warren, cited in Ann Oakley’s study, describes her mother as an incompetent housekeeper—“very muddy, very disorganized . . . erratic and mad in the way she keeps house”—but this mother turns out to have “had a job cleaning” every morning from 5:00 to 7:30 and also to have had the full care of an invalid son. “Incompetence” at home may well have been a way to protest, where protest was possible, the kind of work expected of her for low pay in the workplace and no pay at home. In this case, the daughter’s own experience as a wife and mother did lead her to reread her own mother’s (lack of) domesticity: “I’ve changed completely in my reaction to her and the way she keeps house. When I go down there I just accept it and think, ‘Well, poor woman she works,’ and realize what it’s all about now perhaps—it’s an insight into the way she was, having a baby myself. How she coped, I do not know. When I think of the terrible things one felt about one’s own mother! I can see how it all makes sense now, because I find I’m slackening my standards.”

Incompetence practiced at an early age, like Kingston’s behavior as a “bad girl,” may also be a strategy for avoiding a future of such low-paying and deadening work. Francie Collin, the narrator of Louise Meriwether’s novel *Daddy Was a Number Runner*, is an African-American adolescent growing up in Harlem in the 1930s, whose mother does domestic day-work. Each evening Francie’s mother “would come home and try to keep up with our messy house since I wasn’t much help. I cooked the dinner every day and washed the dishes, but after I dropped a sheet into the backyard while trying to hang it on the line and burnt up one of Daddy’s good shirts with the iron, I didn’t have to help with the laundry no more. I wasn’t very good at cleaning up the house either. Mother said I daydreamed too much and she could do it faster without my help so just get on out of her way.” Francie’s “incompetence” is an act of survival, her preservation from a life her mother has not been able to avoid. The danger of domestic achievement is made clear when Francie’s high-school sewing teacher tells her that “if you would take more time with your backstitch, Francie, you might make a good seamstress one day.”
“I don’t think I’d like it, Mrs. Abowitz. I want to be a secretary when I grow up.”

“Well, Francie, we have to be practical. There aren’t many jobs for Negroes in that field. And while you’re going to school you should learn those things which will stand you in good stead when you have to work.”

“I like shorthand and typing, Mrs. Abowitz,” I said, suddenly stubborn, “and I’m going to be a secretary.”

She sighed. “I don’t know why they teach courses like that to frustrate you people.”

If Francie is to avoid this kind of “tracking” as her mother could not, it is better to be incompetent. Contemporary American folk wisdom suggests that girls should refuse to learn typing for the same reason that Francie refused to sew: if you can do woman’s work, the logic goes, you’ll be forced to do it. In fact, when Francie takes on a one-day domestic job in a desperate moment, it becomes clear that she is indeed capable of housework, just as she is eventually able to cook rice for her father (who knows enough about cooking to teach her how but is clearly unwilling to cook it himself: “it was a goddamn shame a man couldn’t get a decent pot of rice in his own home”). Fränce’s coded displays also find a certain parallel in folktales like the Grimms’ “Clever Gretel” (tale 77, AT 1741), in which a servant uses her wits to appropriate for herself the food she has just cooked for her master.

Francie’s domestic failures are excusable because she is still a child. Although most heterosexual adult women probably could not get away with such broad performances of “incompetence,” one common strategy is to declare incompetence in certain areas but to offset this by demonstrating special competence in another, perhaps less essential or more creative domestic art. Liz Smith, editor of The Mother Book, says that her mother “detested cooking” but made candles beautifully and cooked it as a kind of compensation to her family. Many women declare themselves “disorganized,” thereby excusing themselves from the most repetitive domestic duties, while performing other acts of housewifery with pleasure and skill. By designating areas of competence and incompetence, a woman distracts her family from confrontations, pleases them in one area may “drown out” absence in another. She also gains some control over the shape, if not the fact, of her domestic identity. Since, as I have said, self-proclaimed domestic incompetence is largely a male prerogative, selective incompetence makes a woman a kind of domestic androgynous, “feminine” in certain areas and “masculine” in others.

Somewhere on an undeclared line between refusal and incompetence lies a tradition of folktales in which the key word is laziness. One group of such tales can be found within the category Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson call “The Lazy Woman Is Cured” (AT 902), a variant of “The Shrewish Wife Is Reformed” (AT 900–904). In the prototype, a lazy woman ends up becoming industrious. But there are also tales about lazy women in which this resolution fails to occur. Linda Dégh records a Hungarian tale in which a girl renowned for her laziness is married off to an unsuspecting man from another village. Since her parents have given her an enormous dowry—the man has been burning her dirty clothes instead of washing them. He then returns her—and her dowry—to the parental home. This particular telling omits the reform of the lazy wife and even any indication that she is distressed at being sent home. From the beginning, the anxiety is the mother’s. It is the mother who nags the girl constantly that she will never get a man, and when the bride returns home, it is the mother’s unhappiness, not the bride’s, that the story records. Dégh notes the tale is intended “to point a moral concerning the proper conduct of the village girl” in a “peasant community” where “no lazy girl will ever find herself a husband.”

Another variant of AT 902, the Grimms’ “The Lazy Spinner,” suggests that laziness is not precisely what is at stake. In this tale, the wife “never wanted to do any work” and always left her spinning and her household in a mess. Each time the husband complaints, the woman tricks him into believing the failures to be his own, and finally he gives up asking her to spin. But clearly it is not industry but housework she wants to avoid, for she is willing to expend enormous energy avoiding domestic work. Once again, there is no punishment for the wife’s waywardness; indeed, she is rewarded with the very freedom from domesticity that she sought: “in the future he no longer mentioned yarn and spinning.” As in recognizing its own incompleteness, the Grimms’ version ends with this metacomment: “But you yourself must admit that his wife was a nasty woman.” Such a conclusion seems to mark the teller’s or editor’s effort to impose a penalty where the plot itself does not.

An even more overt sanction for female incompetence structures the Grimms’ “The Three Spinners,” in which three “deformed” old women help a young woman spin an impossible amount of flax. The girl, “a lazy maiden who did not want to spin,” attracts the queen’s attention because her mother is beating her for her laziness and the queen hears the cries. The plot is set in motion by a false claim of
competence: the mother says she is beating the girl for wanting to spin more yarn than the family can afford. This prompts the queen to challenge the maiden to spin herself into marrying the prince, a challenge she meets only because the three women help her. When these women appear at her wedding and the prince asks them to explain why they are so ugly, each woman attributes her deformity to an excess of spinning, whereupon the prince promptly forbids his beautiful bride to spin for the rest of her life. Since the girl was both poor and lazy in the first place and is rewarded with not only the prince but also lifelong liberation from the work she had once refused to do, the story provides a double reward for incompetence. Such a tale may well be mocking those stories in which the industrious servant girl is the one who gets the prince.

All of these examples suggest that lazy may be a coded word, a cover-up, appropriated from the culture's moral discourse and employed for subversive ends. These stories have seemed to support traditional domestic values because they rely on a cultural context in which laziness is negative, obedience virtuous, and marriage both necessary and desirable. Since they do not explicitly verbalize such values, however, the tales are able to function as coded discourse with a double voice. To the extent that the hearer brings traditional cultural assumptions to the listening and hears the stories as if they were saying what the dominant culture expects, they can be heard as innocuous tales reinforcing the status quo. But if the function as subversive tales to the extent that the hearer is ready to mark the absence of punishments and reprimands. I find it highly suggestive that all these double-voiced versions I have cited have a woman teller as their source. It is certainly possible that the tellers' conscious or unconscious ambivalence about domestic competence has led them to coded performances. This also means that hidden beneath the patriarchal typology of Aarne and Thompson's index, there may lie a countertradition of (coded) tales in which the "lazy wife" is not cured and the "shrew" is a woman who knows her own mind.

All of the examples I have cited thus far focus on the individual woman's efforts to avoid domesticity but do not openly challenge domestic ideology. The set of folktales I referred to earlier as "The Husband Who Would Mind the House" (AT 1408) does challenge a cultural notion that work in the home is unskilled labor accomplished much more easily and quickly than manly work; a man who complains about his own work or his wife's housekeeping is made to exchange roles with her and completely botches the enterprise. These tales not only make domestic work at least equal to work outside the home but also mock the demands of husbands who have no understanding of what women do. The underlying of the demanding husband is bolder still in an Egyptian tale presented by Hasan M. El-Shamy, in which a husband is looking for an excuse to beat his very competent wife so that she can show her (and the community) who's boss. His friends advise him to give her some fish to cook and then to find fault with the way she prepares it. Alerted to the trap, the capable wife cooks the fish in three different ways, so that when he complains about one dish, she is able to produce an alternative. Finally, the man becomes so flustered that he orders her to serve him shit, and it so happens that their infant son has just produced some beneath the dinner table. This woman's "competence"—which, ironically, is finally demonstrated in the "incompetence" of not yet having cleaned up the mess beneath the table—disarms the man and exposes his domestic "need" as a capricious exercise in mastery.

Although most of the folktales I have cited have been published with little information about the contexts in which they are told and passed on, El-Shamy's notes to this tale suggest that the telling itself may be a coded act. The Egyptian woman who told this story had, "after finishing her housework and lacking a place to go," been lingering in the doorway of her home while the men of the village told their tales. When she finally asked if she could tell one too, her husband agreed, if the tale were not recorded: "We are fellahin; this would be too serious [an offense] in our community." Finally allowed to speak, this woman, who lived under patriarchal rule, used an act of indirectness—telling a story about someone other than herself—to criticize male dominance. The woman said that she had heard her mother tell this story to a group of women when she was a child; the husband admitted that in fifteen years of marriage he had never heard the tale. Perhaps the tale collector's presence gave the woman a context of safety for telling the aggressive and subversive story she had heretofore considered fit only for women's ears. If subversive tales like these are usually told only among women, we must wonder how many of them no folklorist has yet heard and whether women collectors are more likely to hear them than men are.

This Egyptian tale begins in modest ways to deconstruct the very concept of domestic competence. It makes the necessity for perfect performance a patriarchal quirk and an act of incompetence a woman's way out. A further erosion of domestic competence is enacted in folklore that exposes household work as beyond anybody's competence, that echoes Patricia Andrews's remark that "housework is a waste of time, really... You do it, your husband comes home, and it all gets
mucked up again.”27 This is the sentiment represented in the traditional North American ballad “Housewife’s Lament,” in which a woman, having spent her whole life in a war against dirt, is finally defeated when she lies down, dies, and is buried in it.28 A related phenomenon is the negativity about domestic work that in the 1960s yielded Peg Bracken’s I Hate to Cook Book and I Hate to Housekeep Book, designed to help women “make yourself do things you don’t like to do,” “just that last long mile and cook dinner,” and “keep up a good front.”29 I recently found a turn-of-the-century precursor of these books in an article proposing to help New England women make time for a daily “study hour.” The advice: “Do not put off, but take less time for each thing. The secret to be learned about housework, is how to slight it, and yet do it well.” There follows a host of tips for speeding up washing, cooking, ironing, dishes, dusting, and “blacking the kitchen rage.”30 Such texts do not constitute outright refusals of domesticity and may not free women from much domestic work, but they do undermine the notion of domestic excellence as a measure of a woman’s worth. It is no accident that these writings appear during periods in which higher education for women is on the rise.

A more radical deconstructive strategy that appears to be fairly recent reverses the equation of women with domestic competence by implying that domestic life actually makes women incompetent. This idea was already implicit in turn-of-the-century radical feminism and articulated by writers like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who contrasted the utopian women of Herland with U.S. women, who, she argued, had become stunted by domesticity.31 In more recent renditions, there surfaces from beneath the image of the superwife-athlete-mother a counterfigure of the housewife-mother as maddening wreck. A few years ago, for example, M. Catherine Burns published in an anthology of Maine humor a set of anecdotes in which the narrator is driven crazy by the care and feeding of three sons. After each incident, the narrator presents herself as “a babbling lunatic sitting in the corner” and as having to find a hobby “to divert what’s left of my mind.”32 There is an edge of hostility in this humor, for instance, when one of the children gets lost just before a camping trip and the narrator finds him “packed away in the very front of a U-Haul trailer,” she considers it a sign of her “insanity” that “I only spent five minutes enjoying all the blissful possibilities before letting him out.”33 I recently came across a commercial mug that bore the slogan “Insanity is inherited; you get it from your kids.” If children and housework make the domestically competent woman incompetent, domesticity subverts itself.

Yet as I have suggested, these displays of incompetence risk reinforcing the notion that women really are incompetent. Strategic incompetence can work subversively only to the extent that the performer—or the performer’s political community—has interpretive control of the display. The coded performance of a feminist message may, in the eyes of the receiver, simply reinscribe an existing folklore of female ineptitude found, for example, in men’s jokes about their mothers’ bad cooking—such as the ballad parody that “You can’t chop your mama up in Massachusetts. / Not even if you’re tired of her cuisine”—and in the cultural stereotype of the inept housewife that gets enacted in advertisements for floor cleaners and fabric softeners. Conversely, the coding may be too obvious, so that what a woman represents as incompetence is recognized and treated as a rebellious act. Since no one can control the interpretive process, even the cleverest act of strategic incompetence walks a fine line. On the one hand, it can be derided as mere female ineptitude; on the other, it can be exposed for the act of refusal on which it is based.

Moreover, especially in industrial societies where heterosexuality domestic life isolates women from one another, even the most radical performance of coded incompetence risks remaining an isolated personal act. Such a private action may effect an individual liberation without openly challenging the legitimacy of a female domestic sphere. When Katharine Hepburn says, for example, that “being a housewife and a mother is the biggest job in the world” or that she herself “would have made a terrible parent,” she gets herself off the hook but leaves the mystique of domesticity intact.34 If the performance of incompetence does not embrace a refusal to work—if the woman says she cannot do things but does them anyway or does them badly without any savings of time or energy—then the performance may relieve emotional pressure but may not significantly change the material realities of her life.

Individual acts of coded resistance do, however, become the grounds for feminist revolution when they can be articulated within a theoretical frame. Marge Piercy’s poem “What’s That Smell in the Kitchen?” (quoted in “Strategies of Coding,” p. 21) offers more than a witty catalogue of the different kinds of dinners being burned “all over America”; it creates a model for representing these actions as a collective, coded resistance.35 In the tradition of a classic feminist analysis, the poem builds an understanding of cause and effect from the observation of multiple individual experiences. Piercy exposes incompetence as a rejection of not only the required daily dinner but also the entire performance that constitutes a traditional woman’s
daily life, and on the basis of this understanding, she reconceives incompetence as war. This kind of analysis is, of course, also one task of feminist folklore: to gather and analyze individual moments, decoding and naming them as political acts. Once they are exposed as feminist messages, such performances can no longer function as coded strategies; they become instead the folklore that supports more open resistances.

Even collective resistance to compulsory domesticity carries serious dangers if it does not challenge the larger social system that embeds these notions of competence. Proclamations and displays of domestic incompetence by professional-class women in the United States are as acceptable today as they were once embarrassing, so long as one can pay someone else to do the work. Some women have begun to represent domestic competence as a sign of human incompetence, according to the traditionally masculine convention that a competent person cannot or would not want to do “women’s work.” Since much of this work is physical labor poorly rewarded in both money and status in the United States and most other technological societies, such a devaluation of domestic competence necessarily designates other women and, by displacing domestic work onto women of a less privileged social class, ends up reinforcing the same gender/class divisions that structured such reactionary and racist societies as the antebellum South. This kind of middle-class feminism has already caused painful schisms among women, as Audre Lorde suggests in issuing this challenge to feminists in the academy: “If white American feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting differences in our oppressions, then how do you deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor women and of color?”

Clearly, the challenge is to erase all expectations of competence and incompetence based in class, race, and sex. Insofar as the necessity of domestic competence has functioned as a lever, requiring women of different backgrounds, interests, classes, and races to learn and practice similar skills, women's history could be the basis for understanding that just as there is no sphere for a sex (as Elizabeth Cady Stanton put it in refusing the belief that woman's place was in the home), so there is no sphere for a race or a class. In this way perhaps domestic work can become neutralized both in folklore and in social practice as sometimes necessary, sometimes pleasurable, and sometimes onerous work worthy of respectable status and, when performed for wages, respectable reward. Only those practices that do not transfer domestic competence to an underclass of women—or men—will offer genu-

incly feminist messages, messages that might yield in turn a new folklore in which “valiant women” can make policy and “real men” can make rice, tamales, and quiche.

Notes

1. I have not found this focus on domestic competence in American Indian, African, or African-American folklore, but my research is not sufficient to draw any conclusions from this absence. As will become clear, these equations of femininity with domestic competence also do not apply to leisure-class women (a term defined variously in different cultures and different bodies of folklore).


3. Alan Dundes and Carl L. Pagter, Work Hard and You Shall Be Rewarded: Urban Folklore from the Paperwork Empire (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 50. While I find it disturbing that this definition is passed along without any critical context, I am equally disturbed by the equivocal commentary Dundes and Pagter do attach, for example, to a piece of racist folklore in the same book (127).


12. Voices from Slavery, ed. Norman R. Yetman (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 167. Hines adds, “We didn’t have to [help in the kitchen]; we just did it on our own free will.” The notion of free will—which I have no doubt was experienced in this way by these slaves—is a perfect example of the workings of ideology to make what is culturally demanded seem desirable and freely chosen.


16. Oakley, Woman’s Work, 123.

17. Ibid., 123–24.


19. Ibid., 144.

20. Ibid., 108.


26. El-Shamy notes that “two additional variants of this anecdote are available in Egyptian archives; both were told by females from rural areas” (299).

27. Oakley, Woman’s Work, 113.


32. M. Catherine Burns, “Dr. Sock,” in Ladies’ Choice: A Collection of