

Stevenson's story, like Mary Shelley's story of Frankenstein and the stories of Sherlock Holmes, has come to belong not to its author but to all of us, a fable of emerging scientific rationalism as necessary to our moral education as Prometheus or Pygmalion once were. That by chemical treatment we can precipitate out the evil nature within our ordinary law-abiding well-meaning natures, and thus perhaps rid ourselves of it; that in attempting to do so a heroic overreaching scientist becomes not free of but enslaved to his own worse self - if Stevenson had not first distilled the story, someone else would have had to.

In Ms. Martin's novel, Mary Reilly, housemaid in Dr. Jekyll's well-run London house, is not drawn to the oppositions that tempt and destroy her "Master" (as she always names him). She has suffered from uncontrolled demonic sadism: her father, through the agency of no more sophisticated a chemical than gin, tortured her unforgivably when she was a child, and she doesn't forgive or forget. But she has a sense of the unalterability of what is, and the strength to find a way to live, and even to love, despite it. Unable to grasp the cause, she can still experience vividly the human cost of Jekyll's experiment.

Ms. Martin's greatest triumph in her sidelong retelling is that she makes Mary Reilly and her life belowstairs so convincing. The novel is told in the first person; Mary Reilly has been given a little education at a school in which Dr. Jekyll once took a philanthropic interest (Mary doesn't tell him how poor a place it was), and she fills her penny notebooks late at night while the house is asleep.

Her voice, without being pedantically authentic, is entirely genuine. She is trying to make an herb garden in the dark yard that separates the comfortable house from the dark laboratory: "I set to work with Cook's direction, and heavy work it was, as the ground was so hard it come up in great clods. Cook said first those ugly bushes mun go and they gave me a fair struggle, though they hardly looked alive, and I thought how all plants do struggle and seem to be longing to flourish no matter how badly they are treated or on what hard, unprofitable soil they fall, so I began to feel a little sad for the poor bushes, but Cook said they'd be the death of our herbs so up they mun come." (Mary already feels the difficulty involved in weeding out the strong evil to let the delicate good flourish. It takes art to allow so stark a symbol to spring up in a book, and to have it do work, without seeming to have been planted. Stevenson was himself a master of it.) Mary is committed to service, in all of its meanings; she is as loyal to her house and as proud of it, as acutely concerned for its honor, as a junior officer in a crack regiment. She is clear-eyed about her position and her prospects, but never bitter. She is largely unnoticed by the people upstairs but, though they exclude her, she includes them, and sees them more clearly than they see themselves. The only person who sees as clearly as she does is Mr. Edward Hyde. The story, seen from the servants' hall, is of a natural order overturned. Dr. Jekyll is a good man and a good master; his house is well run and stable, as many houses are not. The first sign of trouble is that the master on whom they all depend, whose well-being they all identify with their own, seems intent on ruining his health with poor diet, late nights and overwork. They sense but cannot formulate the connection between this weakness of their master's and the sudden parasitic appearance of Edward Hyde, who the servants are shocked to learn has been given "the freedom of the house." Hyde's worst characteristic, as they see it, is that though he pretends to authority, he is not a gentleman: Jekyll's subjection to him is a breach in nature.

Ms. Martin abjures the most lurid temptations her scheme might have suggested to her. Mary Reilly's contacts with her master and his other self are few; her life is filled not with drama but with work - cleaning grates, hauling coal, beating carpets and draperies, helping the cook. Every slight advance in intimacy she makes with Dr. Jekyll, every brief glimpse she has of the wrongness at the household's heart, she hoards up to wring its meaning out. The narrowness of her view of Jekyll and his danger is overcome by the intensity of her vision. Her troubled master answers her straightforward human concern for him with distracted gestures of casual kindness. But they are enough for Mary; her concern transmutes to a love willing to risk anything, yet still not strong enough to save him.

The greatest artistic difficulty Ms. Martin faced is one she inherited from Stevenson's original. We often forget that "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" is a mystery story; only in the last pages do we learn the secret of Jekyll's relation to Hyde. Even in the original, the mystery is not well sustained, and it is now patent to every reader; the longeurs in "Mary Reilly" are all due to what we know and Mary tries fruitlessly to discover. Conversely, the most genuinely suspenseful moments (and the strongest

writing) come when the terrible father from whom Mary long ago escaped is glimpsed again. He may appear before her, like a Hyde of her own, and we don't know what will happen.

"Mary Reilly" is an achievement - creativity skating exhilaratingly on thin ice. It shares with some of Ms. Martin's earlier work (along with an apparent obsession with rats) a compulsion to bring together ordinary people with others who are wholly good (as in "A Recent Martyr") or wholly evil. The radical indefinability of the key terms suggests a difficulty with such a schema, and it was a difficulty for Stevenson as well. I think Valerie Martin's treatment of his story actually succeeds in ways Stevenson himself could not have brought off and might well have admired.

John Crowley's works of fiction include "Aegypt," a novel, and "Novelty," a collection of SCENES STEVENSON NEVER IMAGINED

Like Dr. Jekyll's experiment, "Mary Reilly" gave its creator a few surprises. When Valerie Martin began writing this novel, her fifth, she expected it to climax with the same scene Robert Louis Stevenson used in "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde": the storming of Dr. Jekyll's laboratory door.

"Stevenson mentions a housemaid who's standing outside, crying very hard while the butler tells her to hold her tongue," Ms. Martin recalled in a telephone interview from her home in Montague, Mass. "I always thought that I'd like to know why that servant was crying. But when I got to that point in my book, it just didn't happen - my narrator wasn't there."

However, her narrator - one of Dr. Jekyll's maids, Mary Reilly - is in many scenes Stevenson never imagined. "Not everything in my book is in his, nor is any of his in mine," said Ms. Martin, who teaches in the graduate writing program at the University of Massachusetts. Yet Mary Reilly's benevolent concern, she observed, is much more in keeping with Stevenson's mode of storytelling than are the movie versions of his famous tale, which often bring into the story women who are implicated in Jekyll's downfall.

"What's interesting about Stevenson's book is that no woman is held responsible," Ms. Martin said. If she places the blame anywhere, it is on the Victorian milieu: "Mary has had no leisure, and Jekyll's had too much. He's preoccupied with his interior demons, while she's had to leave hers behind."

As for Edward Hyde, Ms. Martin doesn't see him as the embodiment of pure evil. She thinks of the Jekyll-Hyde duality as an illustration of the forces at work within any person - or any fiction. In a novel, she explained. "You want to surprise and shake up your readers, but at the same time, you want to entertain them and draw them in."

-- LAUREL GRAEBER