

Lynette Carpenter' "The Establishment and Preservation of Female Power in Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*"

Constance and Merricat's mother... emerges as the primary keeper of the Blackwood possessions, a woman obsessively tidy and aloof. Her snobbery, inherited by her daughters, later ensures their seclusion: "Our mother disliked the sight of anyone who wanted to walking past our front door, and when our father brought her to live in the Blackwood house, one of the first things he had to do was close off the path and fence in the entire Blackwood property" (p. 26). Like Blackwood wives before her, she added her share of material goods to the Blackwood family wealth. But in one important respect she broke with the tradition of the Blackwood women: she was a bad cook. Although she made her obligatory contribution to the cellar legacy of the Blackwood women-her six jars of apple jelly crowded by "jars of jam made by great-grandmothers, . . . and pickles made by great-aunts and vegetables put up by our grandmother" (p. 60)-she left the cooking and gardening to Constance. To the visiting Mrs. Wright's question about Mrs. Blackwood's cooking, Uncle Julian replies with a shudder, "I personally preferred to chance the arsenic" (p. 50). Mrs. Blackwood's indifference to the kitchen and garden not only sets her apart from her daughters but violates the creative tradition of the Blackwood women, whose accumulated preserves Merricat calls "a poem" (p. 54).

Functioning as the family preservers, the Blackwood women, cleaners and dusters of Blackwood property, lavished attention on a different kind of preserves, burying the fruits of their creative labor beneath the accumulated wealth of their dowries and other Blackwood acquisitions. What property they brought to the Blackwood house became Blackwood property, by law or tradition passed from father to son rather than from mother to daughter, as Merricat suggests by her comment on the Rochester house: "Our mother had been born there and by rights it should have belonged to Constance" (p. 4). While her daughters appear to value objects as artifacts from the domestic history of the Blackwood women (a respect they do not afford masculine possessions), Mrs. Blackwood deviated from her female predecessors and from her daughters in valuing the objects over the foodstuffs, the teacups over the tea itself...

The Blackwood family exploited its women if they were docile and dismissed them if they were not. Mary Katherine, the middle child who was neither a useful daughter nor a male heir, had no appropriate function in the family and was frequently dismissed from its presence for her rebellion against its laws. On the day of the poisoning she had been sent to her room without supper, as Constance reports with a smile: "Merricat was always in disgrace. I used to go up the back stairs with a tray of dinner for her after my father had left the dining room. She was a wicked, disobedient child" (pp. 48-49). Constance's reminiscence suggests whom Merricat disobeyed, whose will she opposed. Six years after the fall of the Blackwood patriarch, she is still being dismissed by the surviving male member of her family, Uncle Julian, who insists that she is dead.