

OLD BAGS

Some notes on the idea
of woman as container



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I first came across the idea of woman as container in Jane Mill's *Womanwords* (1989). Spanning some of the earliest examples of the English language to the 20th century, the book is a comprehensive dictionary of words used to describe/deride women – from amazon to witch.

Within the book she divides the words into various categories such as woman as animal, woman as chaste, woman as goddess, and, crucially, woman as container.

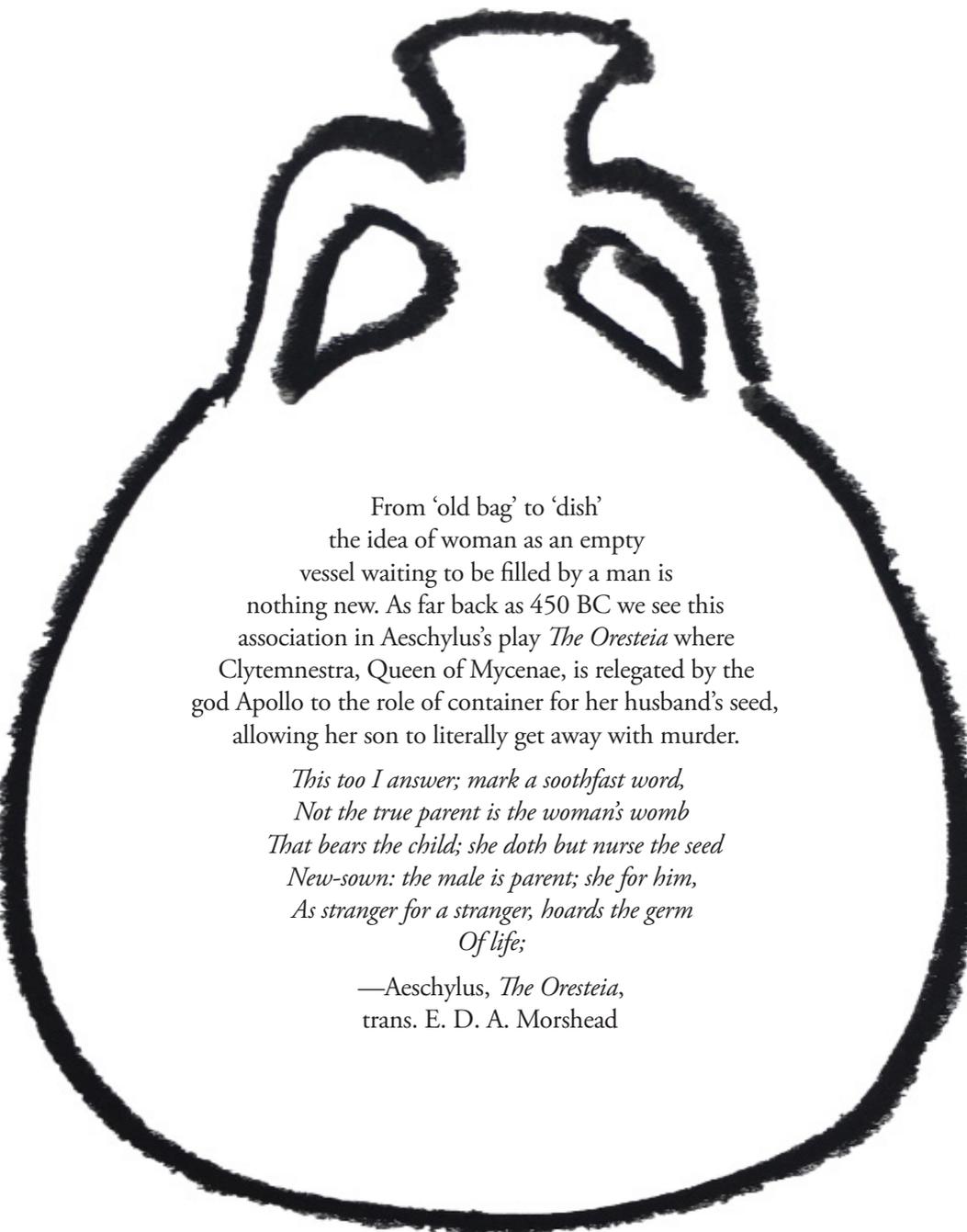
Bag

'...in the C17th it acquires the sense of an udder or breasts, e.g. "Those wicked hags...whose writhed bags foul fiends oft suck." (Henry More, 1642). In the 1890s it denoted a middle-aged or elderly slattern, later a slatternly or part-time prostitute. In the C20th bag ameliorated although it is still used derisively to refer to an unattractive woman, or an ugly or bad-tempered woman.'

Honeypot

'In the C18th honey was male-specific slang for a harmless, foolish, good-natured fellow, but honey-pot was a decidedly female-specific slang term for vagina... In the C19th honey-pot came to be used to denote a woman – yet another term which describes a woman as container or vessel. There can be no doubting the function of woman: honey became slang for semen.'

—Jane Mills, *Womanwords*



From 'old bag' to 'dish'
the idea of woman as an empty
vessel waiting to be filled by a man is
nothing new. As far back as 450 BC we see this
association in Aeschylus's play *The Oresteia* where
Clytemnestra, Queen of Mycenae, is relegated by the
god Apollo to the role of container for her husband's seed,
allowing her son to literally get away with murder.

*This too I answer; mark a soothfast word,
Not the true parent is the woman's womb
That bears the child; she doth but nurse the seed
New-sown: the male is parent; she for him,
As stranger for a stranger, hoards the germ
Of life;*

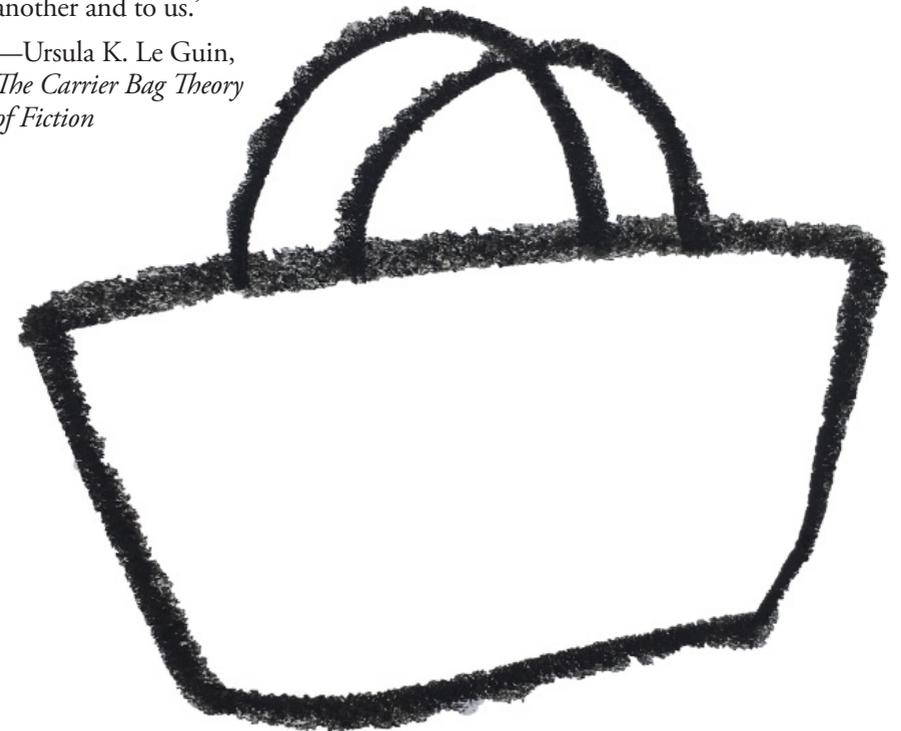
—Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*,
trans. E. D. A. Morshead

Finally, the great Ursula K. Le Guin offers some relief from this sad story of empty vessels in her essay *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*. Here she takes Elizabeth Fisher's idea that before inventing the tool, or the weapon, early humans first had to come up with a bag – in order to collect those all important fruits and grains – and runs with it to invoke the importance of the book as a container for ideas, and stories.

'I now propose the bottle as hero. Not just the bottle of gin or wine, but bottle in its older sense of container in general, a thing that holds something else... A leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container. A holder. A recipient.'

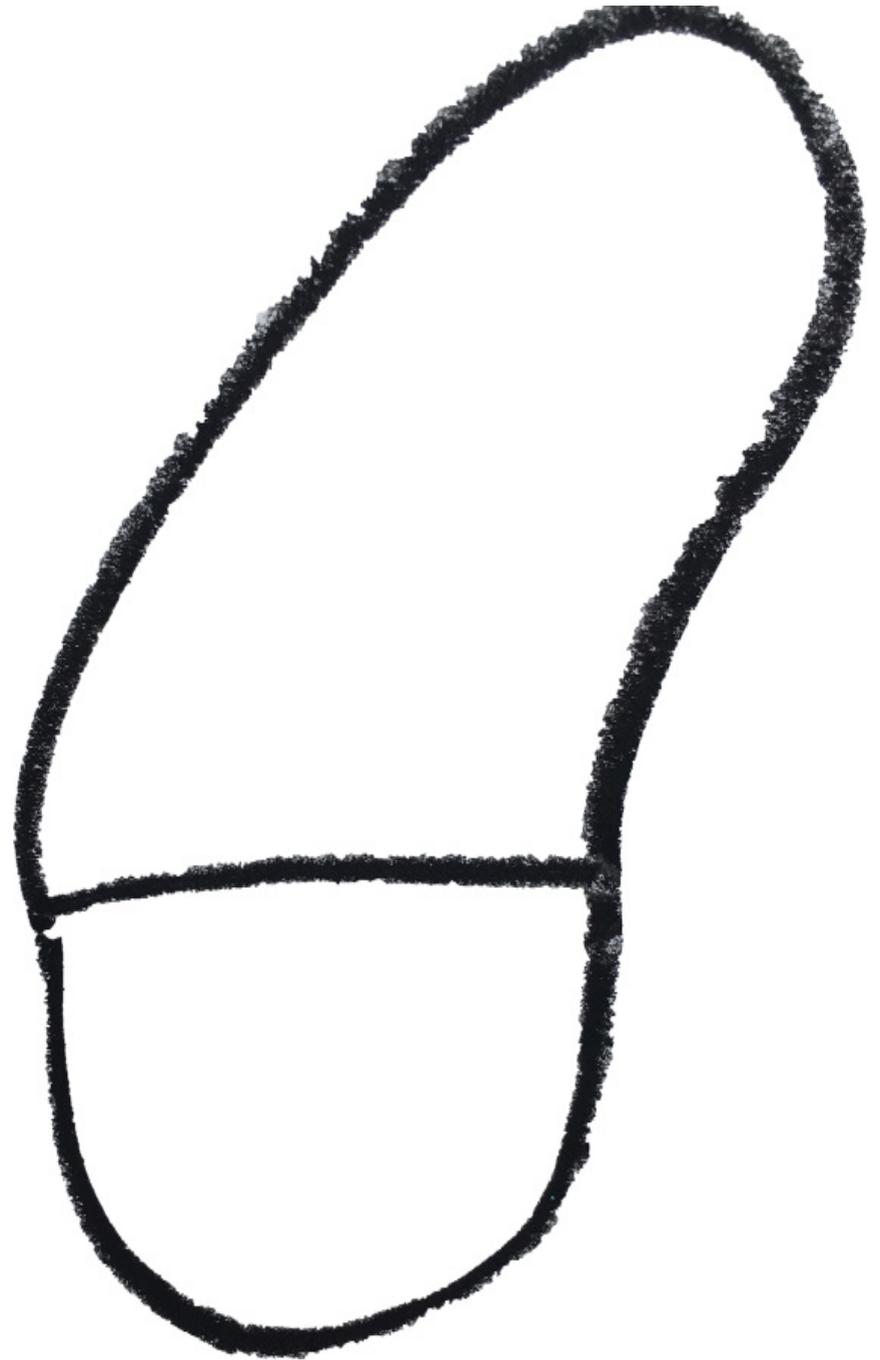
'I would go so far as to say that the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag. A book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us.'

—Ursula K. Le Guin,
*The Carrier Bag Theory
of Fiction*



P.S. It is interesting also to consider how women are often identified with the making of these vessels – in many cultures pottery, basketry and sewing are considered to be women’s crafts – or even how so many amphorae and classical vases seem to echo the shape of woman.

Another time maybe.



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