



HSC English Prescriptions 2019-2023

**English Advanced
Module C: The Craft of Writing**

Margaret Atwood speech

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Margaret Atwood

'Spotty-Handed Villainesses'

From a speech given in various versions, here and there, in 1994

... My title is 'Spotty-Handed Villainesses'; my subtitle is, 'Problems of Female Bad Behaviour in the Creation of Literature'. I should probably have said, 'in the creation of novels, plays and epic poems'. Female bad behaviour occurs in lyric poems, of course, but not at sufficient length.

I began to think about this subject at a very early age. There was a children's rhyme that went:

There was a little girl
Who had a little curl
Right in the middle of her forehead;
When she was good, she was very, very good,
And when she was bad, she was horrid!

No doubt this is a remnant of the Angel/Whore split so popular among the Victorians, but at the age of five I did not know that. I took this to be a poem of personal significance – I did after all have curls – and it brought home to me the deeply Jungian possibilities of a Dr Jekyll–Mr Hyde double life for women. My older brother used this verse to tease me, or so he thought. He did manage to make 'very, very good' sound almost worse than 'horrid', which remains an accurate analysis for the novelist. Create a flawless character and you create an insufferable one; which may be why I am interested in spots.

Some of you may wonder whether the spotty-handedness in my title refers to age spots. Was my lecture perhaps going to centre on that once-forbidden but now red-hot topic, The Menopause, without which any collection of female-abilia would be incomplete? I hasten to point out that my title is not age-related; it refers neither to age spots nor to youth spots. Instead it recalls that most famous of spots, the invisible but indelible one on the hand of wicked Lady Macbeth. Spot as in guilt, spot as in blood, spot as in 'out, damned'. Lady Macbeth was spotted, Ophelia unspotted; both came to sticky ends, but there's a world of difference.

But is it not, today – well, somehow unfeminist – to depict a woman behaving badly? Isn't bad behaviour supposed to be the monopoly of men? Isn't that what we are expected – in defiance of real life – to somehow believe, now? When bad women get into literature, what are they doing there, and are they permissible, and what, if anything, do we need them for?

We do need something like them; by which I mean, something disruptive to static order. When my daughter was five, she and her friend Heather announced that they were putting on a play. We were conscripted as the audience. We took our seats, expecting to see something of note. The play opened with two characters having breakfast. This was promising – an Ibsenian play perhaps, or something by GB Shaw? Shakespeare is not big on breakfast openings, but other playwrights of talent have not disdained them.

The play progressed. The two characters had more breakfast. Then they had more. They passed each other the jam, the cornflakes, the toast. Each asked if the other would like a cup of tea. What was going on? Was this Pinter, perhaps, or Ionesco, or maybe Andy Warhol? The audience grew restless. 'Are you going to do anything except have breakfast?' we said. 'No,' they said. 'Then it isn't a play,' we said. 'Something else has to happen.'

And there you have it, the difference between literature – at least literature as embodied in plays and novels – and life. Something else has to happen. In life we may ask for nothing more than a kind of eternal breakfast – it happens to be my favourite meal, and certainly it is

the most hopeful one, since we don't yet know what atrocities the day may choose to visit upon us – but if we are going to sit still for two or three hours in a theatre, or wade through two or three hundred pages of a book, we certainly expect something more than breakfast.

What kind of something? It can be an earthquake, a tempest, an attack by Martians, the discovery that your spouse is having an affair; or, if the author is hyperactive, all of these at once. Or it can be the revelation of the spottiness of a spotty woman. I'll get around to these disreputable folks shortly, but first let me go over some essentials which may be insulting to your intelligence, but which are comforting to mine, because they help me to focus on what I'm doing as a creator of fictions. If you think I'm flogging a few dead horses – horses which have been put out of their pain long ago – let me assure you that this is because the horses are not in fact dead, but are out there in the world, galloping around as vigorously as ever.

How do I know this? I read my mail. Also, I listen to the questions people ask me, both in interviews and after public readings. The kinds of questions I'm talking about have to do with how the characters in novels ought to behave. Unfortunately, there is a widespread tendency to judge such characters as if they were job applicants, or public servants, or prospective roommates, or somebody you're considering marrying. For instance, I sometimes get a question – almost always, these days, from women – that goes something like, 'Why don't you make the men stronger?' I feel that this is a matter which should more properly be taken up with God. It was not, after all, I who created Adam so subject to temptation that he sacrificed eternal life for an apple; which leads me to believe that God – who is, among other things, an author – is just as enamoured of character flaws and dire plots as we human writers are. The characters in the average novel are not usually folks you would want to get involved with at a personal or business level. How then should we go about responding to such creations? Or, from my side of the page, which is blank when I begin – how should I go about creating them?

What is a novel, anyway? Only a very foolish person would attempt to give a definitive answer to that, beyond stating the more or less obvious facts that it is a literary narrative of some length which purports, on the reverse of the title page, not to be true, but seeks nevertheless to convince its readers that it is. It's typical of the cynicism of our age that, if you write a novel, everyone assumes it's about real people, thinly disguised; but if you write an autobiography everyone assumes you're lying your head off. Part of this is right, because every artist is, among other things, a con-artist.

We con-artists do tell the truth, in a way; but, as Emily Dickinson said, we tell it slant. By indirection we find direction out – so here, for easy reference, is an elimination-dance list of what novels are not.

Novels are not sociological textbooks, although they may contain social comment and criticism.

Novels are not political tracts, although 'politics' – in the sense of human power structures – is inevitably one of their subjects. But if the author's main design on us is to convert us to something – whether that something be Christianity, capitalism, a belief in marriage as the only answer to a maiden's prayer, or feminism, we are likely to sniff it out, and to rebel. As André Gide once remarked, 'It is with noble sentiments that bad literature gets written.'

Novels are not how-to books; they will not show you how to conduct a successful life, although some of them may be read this way. Is *Pride and Prejudice* about how a sensible middle-class nineteenth-century woman can snare an appropriate man with a good income, which is the best she can hope for out of life, given the limitations of her situation? Partly. But not completely.

Novels are not, primarily, moral tracts. Their characters are not all models of good behaviour – or, if they are, we probably won't read them. But they are linked with notions of morality, because they are about human beings and human beings divide behaviour into good and bad. The characters judge each other, and the reader judges the characters. However, the

success of a novel does not depend on a 'Not Guilty' verdict from the reader. As Keats said, Shakespeare took as much delight in creating Iago – that arch-villain – as he did in creating the virtuous Imogen. I would say probably more, and the proof of it is that I'd bet you're more likely to know which play Iago is in.

But although a novel is not a political tract, a how-to book, a sociology textbook or a pattern of correct morality, it is also not merely a piece of Art for Art's Sake, divorced from real life. It cannot do without a conception of form and a structure, true, but its roots are in the mud; its flowers, if any, come out of the rawness of its raw materials.

In short, novels are ambiguous and multi-faceted, not because they're perverse, but because they attempt to grapple with what was once referred to as the human condition, and they do so using a medium which is notoriously slippery – namely, language itself.

Now, let's get back to the notion that in a novel, something else has to happen – other than breakfast, that is. What will that 'something else' be, and how does the novelist go about choosing it? Usually it's backwards to what you were taught in school, where you probably got the idea that the novelist had an overall scheme or idea and then went about colouring it in with characters and words, sort of like paint-by-numbers. But in reality the process is much more like wrestling a greased pig in the dark.

Literary critics start with a nice, clean, already-written text. They then address questions to this text, which they attempt to answer; 'what does it mean' being both the most basic and the most difficult. Novelists, on the other hand, start with the blank page, to which they similarly address questions. But the questions are different. Instead of asking, first of all, 'what does it mean', they work at the widget level; they ask, 'Is this the right word?' 'What does it mean' can only come when there is an 'it' to mean something. Novelists have to get some actual words down before they can fiddle with the theology. Or, to put it another way: God started with chaos – dark, without form and void – and so does the novelist. Then God made one detail at a time. So does the novelist. On the seventh day, God took a break to consider what he'd done. So does the novelist. But the critic starts on Day Seven.

The critic, looking at plot, asks, 'What's happening here?' The novelist, creating plot, asks, 'What happens next?' The critic asks, 'Is this believable?' The novelist, 'How can I get them to believe this?' The novelist, echoing Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum that art is what you can get away with, says, 'How can I pull this off?' – as if the novel itself were a kind of bank robbery. Whereas the critic is liable to exclaim, in the mode of the policeman making the arrest, 'Aha! You can't get away with that!'

In short, the novelist's concerns are more practical than those of the critic; more concerned with 'how to', less concerned with metaphysics. Any novelist – whatever his or her theoretical interests – has to contend with the following how-to questions:

- What kind of story shall I choose to tell? Is it, for instance, comic or tragic or melodramatic, or all?
- How shall I tell it?
- Who will be at the centre of it, and will this person be a) admirable or b) not?
- And – more important than it may sound – will it have a happy ending, or not?

No matter what you are writing – what genre and in what style, whether cheap formula or high-minded experiment – you will still have to answer – in the course of your writing – these essential questions. Any story you tell must have a conflict of some sort, and it must have suspense. In other words: something other than breakfast.

Let's put a woman at the centre of the something-other-than-breakfast, and see what happens. Now there is a whole new set of questions. Will the conflict be supplied by the natural world? Is our female protagonist lost in the jungle, caught in a hurricane, pursued by sharks? If so, the story will be an adventure story and her job is to run away, or else to combat the sharks, displaying courage and fortitude, or else cowardice and stupidity. If there

is a man in the story as well, the plot will alter in other directions: he will be a rescuer, an enemy, a companion in struggle, a sex bomb, or someone rescued by the woman. Once upon a time, the first would have been more probable, that is, more believable to the reader; but times have changed and art is what you can get away with, and the other possibilities have now entered the picture.

Stories about space invasions are similar, in that the threat comes from outside and the goal for the character, whether achieved or not, is survival. War stories per se – ditto, in that the main threat is external. Vampire and werewolf stories are more complicated, as are ghost stories; in these, the threat is from outside, true, but the threatening thing may also conceal a split-off part of the character's own psyche. Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* are in large part animated by such hidden agendas; and both revolve around notions of female sexuality. Once all werewolves were male, and female vampires were usually mere sidekicks; but there are now female werewolves, and women are moving in on the star bloodsucking roles as well. Whether this is good or bad news I hesitate to say.

Detective and espionage stories may combine many elements, but would not be what they are without a crime, a criminal, a tracking-down, and a revelation at the end; again, all sleuths were once male, but sleuthesses are now prominent, for which I hope they lay a votive ball of wool from time to time upon the tomb of the sainted Miss Marple. We live in an age not only of gender crossover but of genre crossover, so you can throw all of the above into the cauldron and stir.

Then there are stories classed as 'serious' literature, which centre not on external threats – although some of these may exist – but on relationships among the characters. To avoid the eternal breakfast, some of the characters must cause problems for some of the others. This is where the questions really get difficult. As I've said, the novel has its roots in the mud, and part of the mud is history; and part of the history we've had recently is the history of the women's movement, and the women's movement has influenced how people read, and therefore what you can get away with, in art.

Some of this influence has been beneficial. Whole areas of human life that were once considered non-literary or sub-literary – such as the problematical nature of homemaking, the hidden depths of motherhood, and of daughterhood as well, the once-forbidden realms of incest and child abuse – have been brought inside the circle that demarcates the writeable from the non-writeable. Other things, such as the Cinderella happy ending – the Prince Charming one – have been called into question. (As one lesbian writer remarked to me, the only happy ending she found believable any more was the one in which girl meets girl and ends up with girl; but that was fifteen years ago, and the bloom is off even that romantic rose.)

To keep you from being too depressed, let me emphasise that none of this means that you, personally, cannot find happiness with a good man, a good woman or a good pet canary; just as the creation of a bad female character doesn't mean that women should lose the vote. If bad male characters meant that, for men, all men would be disenfranchised immediately. We are talking about what you can get away with in art; that is, what you can make believable. When Shakespeare wrote his sonnets to his dark-haired mistress, he wasn't saying that blondes were ugly, he was merely pushing against the notion that only blondes were beautiful. The tendency of innovative literature is to include the hitherto excluded, which often has the effect of rendering ludicrous the conventions that have just preceded the innovation. So the form of the ending, whether happy or not, does not have to do with how people live their lives – there is a great deal of variety in that department (and, after all, in life every story ends with death, which is not true of novels). Instead it's connected with what literary conventions the writer is following or pulling apart at the moment. Happy endings of the Cinderella kind do exist in stories, of course, but they have been relegated largely to genre fiction, such as Harlequin romances.

To summarise some of the benefits to literature of the Women's Movement – the expansion of the territory available to writers, both in character and in language; a sharp-eyed examination of the way power works in gender relations, and the exposure of much of this as socially constructed; a vigorous exploration of many hitherto-concealed areas of experience. But as with any political movement which comes out of real oppression – and I do emphasise the real – there was also, in the first decade at least of the present movement, a tendency to cookie-cut: that is, to write to a pattern and to oversugar on one side. Some writers tended to polarise morality by gender – that is, women were intrinsically good and men bad; to divide along allegiance lines – that is, women who slept with men were sleeping with the enemy; to judge by tribal markings – that is, women who wore high heels and makeup were instantly suspect, those in overalls were acceptable; and to make hopeful excuses: that is, defects in women were ascribable to the patriarchal system and would cure themselves once that system was abolished. Such oversimplifications may be necessary to some phases of political movements. But they are usually problematical for novelists, unless the novelist has a secret desire to be in billboard advertising.

If a novelist writing at that time was also a feminist, she felt her choices restricted. Were all heroines to be essentially spotless of soul – struggling against, fleeing from or done in by male oppression? Was the only plot to be *The Perils of Pauline*, with a lot of moustache-twirling villains but minus the rescuing hero? Did suffering prove you were good? (If so – think hard about this – wasn't it all for the best that women did so much of it?) Did we face a situation in which women could do no wrong, but could only have wrong done to them? Were women being confined yet again to that alabaster pedestal so beloved of the Victorian age, when Woman as better-than-man gave men a licence to be gleefully and enjoyably worse than women, while all the while proclaiming that they couldn't help it because it was their nature? Were women to be condemned to virtue for life, slaves in the salt-mines of goodness? How intolerable.

Of course, the feminist analysis made some kinds of behaviour available to female characters which, under the old dispensation – the pre-feminist one – would have been considered bad, but under the new one were praiseworthy. A female character could rebel against social strictures without then having to throw herself in front of a train like Anna Karenina; she could think the unthinkable and say the unsayable; she could flout authority. She could do new bad-good things, such as leaving her husband and even deserting her children. Such activities and emotions, however, were – according to the new moral thermometer of the times – not really bad at all; they were good, and the women who did them were praiseworthy. I'm not against such plots. I just don't think they are the only ones.

And there were certain new no-no's. For instance: was it at all permissible, any more, to talk about women's will to power, because weren't women supposed by nature to be communal egalitarians? Could one depict the scurvy behaviour often practised by women against one another, or by little girls against other little girls? Could one examine the Seven Deadly Sins in their female versions – to remind you, Pride, Anger, Lust, Envy, Avarice, Greed and Sloth – without being considered anti-feminist? Or was a mere mention of such things tantamount to aiding and abetting the enemy, namely the male power-structure? Were we to have a warning hand clapped over our mouths, yet once again, to prevent us from saying the unsayable – though the unsayable had changed? Were we to listen to our mothers, yet once again, as they intoned – 'If You Can't Say Anything Nice, Don't Say Anything At All'? Hadn't men been giving women a bad reputation for centuries? Shouldn't we form a wall of silence around the badness of women, or at best explain it away by saying it was the fault of Big Daddy, or – permissible too, it seems – of Big Mom? Big Mom, that agent of the patriarchy, that pronatalist, got it in the neck from certain seventies feminists; though mothers were admitted into the fold again once some of these women turned into them. In a word: were women to be homogenised – one woman is the same as another – and deprived of free will – as in, 'the patriarchy made her do it'?

Or, in another word – were men to get all the juicy parts? Literature cannot do without bad behaviour, but was all the bad behaviour to be reserved for men? Was it to be all Iago and Mephistopheles, and were Jezebel and Medea and Medusa and Delilah and Regan and Goneril and spotty-handed Lady Macbeth and Rider Haggard's powerful superfemme fatale in *She*, and Tony Morrison's mean Sula, to be banished from view? I hope not. Women characters, arise! Take back the night! In particular, take back the Queen of the Night, from Mozart's *Magic Flute*. It's a great part, and due for revision.

I have always known that there were spellbinding evil parts for women. For one thing, I was taken at an early age to see *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Never mind the Protestant work ethic of the dwarfs. Never mind the tedious housework-is-virtuous motif. Never mind the fact that Snow White is a vampire – anyone who lies in a glass coffin without decaying and then comes to life again must be. The truth is that I was paralysed by the scene in which the evil queen drinks the magic potion and changes her shape. What power, what untold possibilities!

Also, I was exposed to the complete, unexpurgated *Grimm's Fairy Tales* at an impressionable age. Fairy tales had a bad reputation among feminists for a while – partly because they'd been cleaned up, on the erroneous supposition that little children don't like gruesome gore, and partly because they'd been selected to fit the fifties 'Prince Charming Is Your Goal' ethos. So *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* were okay, though *The Youth Who Set Out to Learn What Fear Was*, which featured a good many rotting corpses, plus a woman who was smarter than her husband, were not. But many of these tales were originally told and retold by women, and these unknown women left their mark. There is a wide range of heroines in these tales; passive good girls, yes, but adventurous, resourceful women as well, and proud ones, and slothful ones, and foolish ones, and envious and greedy ones, and also many wise women and a variety of evil witches, both in disguise and not, and bad stepmothers and wicked ugly sisters and false brides as well. The stories, and the figures themselves, have immense vitality, partly because no punches are pulled – in the versions I read, the barrels of nails and the red-hot shoes were left intact – and also because no emotion is unrepresented. Singly, the female characters are limited and two-dimensional. But put all together, they form a rich five-dimensional picture.

Female characters who behave badly can of course be used as sticks to beat other women – though so can female characters who behave well, witness the cult of the Virgin Mary, better than you'll ever be, and the legends of the female saints and martyrs – just cut on the dotted line, and, minus one body part, there's your saint, and the only really good woman is a dead woman, so if you're so good why aren't you dead?

But female bad characters can also act as keys to doors we need to open, and as mirrors in which we can see more than just a pretty face. They can be explorations of moral freedom – because everyone's choices are limited, and women's choices have been more limited than men's, but that doesn't mean women can't make choices. Such characters can pose the question of responsibility, because if you want power you have to accept responsibility, and actions produce consequences. I'm not suggesting an agenda here, just some possibilities; nor am I prescribing, just wondering. If there's a closed-off road, the curious speculate about why it's closed off, and where it might lead if followed; and evil women have been, for a while recently, a somewhat closed-off road, at least for fiction-writers.

While pondering these matters, I thought back over the numerous bad female literary characters I have known, and tried to sort them into categories. If you were doing this on a blackboard, you might set up a kind of grid: bad women who do bad things for bad reasons, good women who do good things for good reasons, good women who do bad things for good reasons, bad women who do bad things for good reasons, and so forth. But a grid would just be a beginning, because there are so many factors involved: for instance, what the character thinks is bad, what the reader thinks is bad, and what the author thinks is bad, may all be different. But let me define a thoroughly evil person as

one who intends to do evil, and for purely selfish reasons. The Queen in *Snow White* would fit that.

So would Regan and Goneril, Lear's evil daughters; very little can be said in their defence, except that they seem to have been against the patriarchy. Lady Macbeth, however, did her wicked murder for a conventionally acceptable reason, one that would win approval for her in corporate business circles – she was furthering her husband's career. She pays the corporate-wife price, too – she subdues her own nature, and has a nervous breakdown as a result. Similarly, Jezebel was merely trying to please a sulky husband; he refused to eat his dinner until he got hold of Naboth's vineyard, so Jezebel had its owner bumped off. Wifely devotion, as I say. The amount of sexual baggage that has accumulated around this figure is astounding, since she doesn't do anything remotely sexual in the original story, except put on makeup.

The story of Medea, whose husband Jason married a new princess, and who then poisoned the bride and murdered her own two children, has been interpreted in various ways. In some versions Medea is a witch and commits infanticide out of revenge; but the play by Euripides is surprisingly neo-feminist. There's quite a lot about how tough it is to be a woman, and Medea's motivation is commendable – she doesn't want her children to fall into hostile hands and be cruelly abused – which is also the situation of the child-killing mother in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. A good woman, then, who does a bad thing for a good reason. Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* kills her nasty lover due to sexual complications; here too we are in the realm of female-as-victim, doing a bad thing for a good reason. (Which, I suppose, places such stories right beside the front page, along with women who kill their abusive husbands. According to a recent *Time* story, the average jail sentence in the U.S. for men who kill their wives is four years, but for women who kill their husbands – no matter what the provocation – it's twenty. (For those who think equality is already with us, I leave the statistics to speak for themselves.)

These women characters are all murderers. Then there are the seducers; here again, the motive varies. I have to say too that with the change in sexual mores, the mere seduction of a man no longer rates very high on the sin scale. But try asking a number of women what the worst thing is that a woman friend could possibly do to them. Chances are the answer will involve the theft of a sexual partner.

Some famous seductresses have really been patriotic espionage agents. Delilah, for instance, was an early Mata Hari, working for the Philistines, trading sex for military information. Judith, who all but seduced the enemy general Holofernes and then cut off his head and brought it home in a sack, was treated as a heroine, although she has troubled men's imaginations through the centuries – witness the number of male painters who have depicted her – because she combines sex with violence in a way they aren't accustomed to and don't much like. Then there are figures like Hawthorne's adulterous Hester Prynne, she of *The Scarlet Letter*, who becomes a kind of sex-saint through suffering – we assume she did what she did through Love, and thus she becomes a good woman who did a bad thing for a good reason – and Madame Bovary, who not only indulged her romantic temperament and voluptuous sensual appetites, but spent too much of her husband's money doing it, which was her downfall. A good course in double-entry bookkeeping would have saved the day. I suppose she is a foolish woman who did a stupid thing for an insufficient reason, since the men in question were dolts. Neither the modern reader nor the author consider her very evil, though many contemporaries did, as you can see if you read the transcript of the court case in which the forces of moral rectitude tried to get the book censored.

One of my favourite bad women is Becky Sharpe, of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. She makes no pretensions to goodness. She is wicked, she enjoys being wicked, and she does it out of vanity and for her own profit, tricking and deluding English society in the process – which, the author implies, deserves to be tricked and deluded, since it is hypocritical and selfish to the core. Becky, like Undine Spragg in Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*, is an

adventuress; she lives by her wits and uses men as ambulatory bank-accounts. Many literary adventurers are male – consider Thomas Mann's *Felix Krull*, *Confidence Man* – but it does make a difference if you change the gender. For one thing, the nature of the loot changes. For a male adventurer, the loot is money and women; but for a female one, the loot is money and men.

Becky Sharpe is a bad mother too, and that's a whole other subject – bad mothers and wicked stepmothers and oppressive aunts, like the one in *Jane Eyre*, and nasty female teachers, and depraved governesses, and evil grannies. The possibilities are many.

But I think that's enough reprehensible female behaviour for you today. Life is short, art is long, motives are complex, and human nature is endlessly fascinating. Many doors stand ajar; others beg to be unlocked. What is in the forbidden room? Something different for everyone, but something you need to know and will never find out unless you step across the threshold. If you are a man, the bad female character in a novel may be – in Jungian terms – your anima; but if you're a woman, the bad female character is your shadow; and as we know from the Offenbach opera *Tales of Hoffman*, she who loses her shadow also loses her soul.

Evil women are necessary in story traditions for two much more obvious reasons, of course. First, they exist in life, so why shouldn't they exist in literature? Second – which may be another way of saying the same thing – women have more to them than virtue. They are fully dimensional human beings; they too have subterranean depths; why shouldn't their many-dimensionality be given literary expression? And when it is, female readers do not automatically recoil in horror. In Aldous Huxley's novel *Point Counter Point*, Lucy Tantomont, the man-destroying vamp, is preferred by the other female characters to the earnest, snivelling woman whose man she has reduced to a wet bath sponge. As one of them says, 'Lucy's obviously a force. You may not like that kind of force. But you can't help admiring the force in itself. It's like Niagara.' In other words, awesome. Or, as one Englishwoman said to me recently, 'Women are tired of being good all the time.'

I will leave you with a final quotation. It's from Dame Rebecca West, speaking in 1912 – 'Ladies of Great Britain ... we have not enough evil in us.'

Note where she locates the desired evil. In us.

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