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**“Taking them to the moon in a station wagon”:
The inclusive discourses of Ann-Marie MacDonald**

by

Melanie Lee Lockhart, B.A.

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
7 January 1999
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Research
acceptance of the thesis

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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "LTR McDonald". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping loop over the "McDonald" part. It is positioned above a horizontal line.

Thesis Supervisor and Chair, Department of English

Carleton University
January 11, 1999

Abstract

This thesis demonstrates how Ann-Marie MacDonald's texts include the voices of groups who have been marginalized by traditional western literature and culture, both by bringing them into chorus with mainstream traditions and by subverting oppressive constructs that inform our cultural norms. It shows how her work normalizes social realities that might formerly have been considered alien, like homosexuality and racial and social difference, and invites people who embody those realities into a literary space where their experiences and voices are equally important. Exploring MacDonald's strategic uses of language, intertext, and humour in *Fall On Your Knees*, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, and *The Arab's Mouth*, this paper discusses the ways in which her work resonates with postmodern, feminist, and reconstructionist theory. It concludes that MacDonald brings experiences at opposite ends of the social spectrum into dialogue with one another in order to create meaningful, inclusive discourse.

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This paper is dedicated to my grandmother, Estelle MacDonald, who taught me to delight in the company of good books.

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Introduction

Since publishing her Governor General's Award-winning first play, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, Ann-Marie MacDonald has taken the Canadian literary establishment by storm. Her work is critically acclaimed and read by readers of the classics and of popular literature alike. MacDonald's texts, though quite intellectual and literary at times, are carefully crafted to speak to a wide and varied audience.

This wide-ranging appeal is what MacDonald's work is all about. Her sharp gaze focuses on inclusion by bringing marginalized voices into concert with the mainstream. Her work is eclectic, multi-lingual, and multi-faceted. It brings her reader into a world where things that might otherwise seem alien are the norm, and are the very elements that make one feel at home. Ann-Marie MacDonald's entire *oeuvre* is rooted in the premise that experiences at opposite ends of the spectrum must be brought into dialogue with one another before meaningful discourse can be born.

For MacDonald, bringing the voices of the marginalized into conversation with the mainstream is the *sine qua non* of a representative

and democratic literature. In a recent interview, she described her conception of the role of the marginalized in mainstream culture:

[T]he marginalized people have a lot to teach about the centre. And it's interesting, because I think my own immigrant background is all about wanting to seize the mainstream, but not be obliterated by it. I want to seize it, and I want to become part of it, and I want to change it, and I want to say it's mine too, and I'm different. But I don't want to bomb all the old buildings — in fact I love them, could I please have a room in one of them? And it's going to be very different once I'm there. It's all about accretion and transformation as opposed to destruction. (Lockhart xvii)

This paper will show how MacDonald's work transforms the "old buildings" of our western culture; her writing probes and exposes foundational weaknesses — and urges us to change the ways we build new structures so as to avoid reproducing them.

The last thirty years have seen an explosion in literary theories that investigate the relationships of the marginalized to mainstream western society. Of particular interest is literature's treatment of the voices of racial minorities and women. Reconstructionism, advanced by Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, suggests that "meaning" is established when different discourses come into contact with one another. Words on their own do not have meaning; rather, language only becomes invested with meaning when different peoples' collective understandings react

with one another. Reconstructionist texts embrace numerous meanings — sociolinguistic, intertextual, paraverbal, situational — and meld them together to create language that is “plural”. They open the door to tangential meaning, creating a language that demands recourse to the reader’s personal experience. Since a word can mean different things to different people (because all readers bring their own knowledge and experiences to a text), “meaning” is fluid and temporary. Different readers bring to bear on the text different discourses, and multiple meanings are produced that can speak to marginalized readers because of the interplay between their experiences and the writing. The marginalized reader becomes an active part of the meaning-making process — and readers who constitute the audience “majority” are, for their part, urged to consider the implications of formerly silenced voices in the texts. Ann-Marie MacDonald, it will be argued, embraces the reconstructionist project by giving voice to marginalized characters.

The struggle for acceptance is problematic for MacDonald if it necessitates the rejection of others: as she stated in an interview with Guy Lawson, “[e]verything I’ve ever written is about diversity. It’s about the fight to make the world larger, not smaller, to welcome what is, not what we’d prefer” (55). Writing that removes women’s voices from a patriarchal context in order to empower them is, for MacDonald,

problematic. Rather, she makes rich use of patriarchal traditions and contexts, like the works of Shakespeare and the teachings of the Catholic Church, for example, as a base from which her social inquiries can be launched. MacDonald's strategy of inclusion proceeds by building alternative structures on a foundational, albeit patriarchal, culture that is the inheritance of male and female readers alike. The resulting intertextual play between canonical texts and writing that subverts or challenges them acts both to renew language and to invite the reader's participation in the re-creation of its possibilities.

MacDonald also endeavors to widen the scope of language by bringing "alternative" forms of communication into play, enhancing and questioning accepted versions of "truth" by drawing upon discourses not traditionally associated with literary language. Her characters enrich and personalize their own discourses by using a wealth of myth, story, and history drawn from the world that socializes them.

This paper will examine MacDonald's uses of languages, intertext and humour to explore postmodern feminist discourse. It will present her as a reconstructionist feminist writer whose characters celebrate the polyphonic expression of their own voices in her first novel, *Fall On Your Knees*, as well as the plays *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*

and *The Arab's Mouth*. The first chapter will provide some background in postmodern, feminist, and reconstructionist theory, and will draw parallels between the goals of these theoretical approaches and MacDonald's work. The chapters following will document MacDonald's use of strategies that are important to her own concept of a discourse of inclusion. Fundamental to her aesthetic preoccupations are the uses of intertext and humour to subvert social norms.

The second chapter will examine MacDonald's mixing of alternative modes of language, and the role of language itself. MacDonald opens the system of language, of speech and writing, to an interactive process at all levels. Certainly, the nature of dialogue is such that each participant in the linguistic process intends and interprets meaning throughout any exchange. But what of the words, the signifiers, themselves? In MacDonald's texts, they are actors in the *déroulement* of the story. Language is an agent of both inclusion and exclusion — and plays a role in identifying (and therefore defining) characters. By charting her characters' acceptance and uses of different languages, and by drawing her reader's attention to these social practices, MacDonald introduces another means of storytelling that brings multiple voices to bear on the actual "writing" of the story. Her stories are voiced in multiple languages; their very existence in the text questions the power of a

dominant literary discourse that works to occlude the role and legitimacy of other languages that articulate alternative responses to our cultural history.

MacDonald's use of sub-literary forms, like illustrations, will also form part of the discussion of her breach of the borders of language to import new discourses. *Fall On Your Knees* employs drawings and other graphical representations to bring the story to life. It uses multiple modes of communication to create meaning, a strategy resonant with Bakhtin's dialogic, which insists that all communications are fluid and alive, that they evolve with the introduction of each new participant's points of reference.

The third chapter will explore the subversive and liberating use of intertext in MacDonald's writing. Intertext plays a particularly important role in her work, informing her writing and, in resonance with Bakhtin, providing new meanings to both characters and readers. Consistent with her avowed determination to "make the world larger" (Lawson 55), MacDonald alludes to numerous other recognizable constructs — most notably, perhaps, Catholicism, music, and other literary texts — and uses those allusions to contribute to meaning. MacDonald similarly uses traditional archetypes, though in unconventional ways. Her project of

embracing the multiplicity of “truth” as it is expressed in traditional literatures leads her to re-consider such archetypes, and her intertextual inversions highlight new discourses.

A discussion of MacDonald’s playful and thoughtful inversions of convention (literary *and* social) informs the final chapter of this thesis. Parody and humour subvert and interrogate accepted notions of meaning, and are important strategies of re-creation. She uses humour to lighten what are often very dark passages in the story — she has described *Fall On Your Knees* as “like the Old Testament, with jokes” (Menzies). There is artful intention in this play, however, for MacDonald’s intelligent humour contributes to the reader’s construction of the story. In fact, her project is at its most reconstructionist when her parody and humour open a space for telling a new story that rings liberating changes on old metanarratives.

MacDonald’s literary strategies of inclusion, of inversion, and of multi-voiced expression enact the feminist voice she proposes. She celebrates the layering of multiple authors in her work, and thus reconstitutes the tradition that she writes to enlarge, rather than to reject. With roots in the alternative theatre as both actress and playwright, MacDonald grows out of a collaborative practice of

storymaking in which a number of artists participate in the creation of the text. She takes this collective approach to playwriting one step further, exploring a kind of fiction that is outside of the conventional, literary realm to bring the audience into the meaning-making process. Her writing encourages readers to participate in the authorial process — thus giving relevance and validity to their voices as they are evoked.

MacDonald's writing draws upon discourses that express women's shared social experience (developed within a patriarchal value system) to produce an inclusive, fluid, and individually meaningful voice. Her texts are multiplicitous and reconstructionist; they erase the borders that delineate the margins. These are the basic elements of MacDonald's discourse of inclusion.

Chapter One:

Some Theoretical Background

Postmodernism, feminism, and reconstructionism are perhaps the three streams of literary criticism most relevant to MacDonald's project.

Conceptually, they are also complementary in many ways.

Postmodernism, feminism, and reconstructionist theory hold a number of fundamental elements in common: they all address the issue of giving voice to groups that have been silenced in society and literature; they all question hegemony and seek to empower the collective; and they all employ strategies of subversion to de-stabilize the accepted "order".

These theoretical approaches are well-suited to MacDonald's project, because they all posit the importance of the marginalized voice in a meaningfully inclusive literature.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism was a logical next step in a western culture that, beginning in the 1960s, was becoming increasingly aware of the social, racial, and gender inequality it propagated. As attention focused on civil rights, writers began to re-consider the ways their work portrayed certain groups, not least because of the recognition that those groups had been silenced by a literary culture that excluded their voices. Writing was

acknowledged to be an unavoidably political and ideological act; writers were called upon to be responsible for their appropriation and portrayal of others' voices. As Linda Hutcheon remarks,

Postmodern literature situates itself squarely in the context of its own reading and writing as social and ideological actualities. . . . the act of making fictions is an *unavoidably* ideological act, that is, a process of creating meaning within a social context. (TCP 10)

Attention to the appropriation of marginalized voices is fundamental to the evolution of the postmodern movement. Postmodern theorists recognize that the dominant literary culture ignores certain groups and casts them in the role of "other" — unnatural, abnormal, with voices that exist entirely outside of the literature and even the language of the majority. One of postmodernism's primary projects, then, is to bring the voices of those groups back into the "centre", where their experiences can be recognized. Linda Hutcheon argues that, for Canadian postmodern writers in particular, the concept of difference is fundamental to fostering acceptance, and to being able to write truthfully about different language, social, and gender groups:

The postmodern 'different', then, is starting to replace the humanist 'universal' as a prime cultural value. . . . [P]ostmodernism offers a context in which to understand the valuing of difference in a way that makes particular sense in Canada. (TCP ix)

Given that one of its concerns is the re-evaluation of literature's

appropriation of voices, the postmodern movement is necessarily interrogatory:

[Postmodernism] . . . question[s] authority — in all its guises — but often it offers no final answers; indeed, it is suspicious of the very notion of final answers. The interrogative is the mode of the postmodern. . . . (Hutcheon *TCP* x)

Postmodern texts employ a number of strategies that force readers to confront their own assumptions, as part of their authors' insistence that readers play a part in the process of textual production. When their self-reflexivity calls attention to their own constructedness, these texts urge readers to recognize the ideologies at play. Such a strategy prevents readers from accepting what they read as non-ideologically charged, and invites them to recognize that they are reading texts written by social beings who have infused them with their own ideologies and conceptions.

As Hutcheon explains,

in the postmodern this self-consciousness of art *as art* is paradoxically made the means to a new engagement with the social and the historical world, and . . . this is done in such a way as to challenge (though not destroy) our traditional humanist beliefs about the function of art in society. (*TCP* 1-2)

The refusal to allow the reader to remain outside the text as a voyeur is an important element of postmodernism's interrogation of authority in texts. Readers must recognize the ideologies at play, and accept the fact that they are internalizing a *construct*.

Parody is central to postmodernism's foregrounding of the ideological construction of text. In Hutcheon's words, "[b]y both using and ironically abusing general conventions and specific forms of representation, postmodern art works to de-naturalize them" (*PoP* 8). The postmodern project, in drawing attention to the constructedness of the text, urges the reader to question textual creation, to resist an unreflexive acceptance of the meanings that texts propose as "natural". Indeed, postmodernism goes even further, suggesting that form and language are constitutive of meaning, not its neutral transmitters. MacDonald's fictions are as much concerned with the subjective qualities of language and narrative devices as they are with her characters' stories.

Parody is surely MacDonald's "favourite" postmodern strategy, for she uses it everywhere with delight to unmask the master narratives of a hegemonic tradition, and to infuse her texts with a crackling wit. *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, for example, recounts the story of an academic who strives to prove that two of Shakespeare's tragedies, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, were originally comedies. The heroine, Constance Ledbelly, finds herself acting *in* the world of the plays, to both subversive and humorous effect. This play exemplifies

MacDonald's talent as a brilliant parodist, for Constance's actions within Shakespeare's plays force us to reconsider some of the socially-bound assumptions (specifically, class and gender roles) on which they are based. In *The Arab's Mouth*, MacDonald parodies the Gothic. In *Fall On Your Knees*, she parodies many social structures and literary conventions, from the Gothic to Roman Catholicism. Marta Dvorak, in fact, argues that MacDonald's

strategy ultimately boils down to a pattern of recognition and reversal, a systematic turning upside down and inside out, a strategy of deviance. (130)

Whether it be to uncover tacit racism, gender bias or social discrimination, her work (like the postmodern project) forces the reader to approach the text as an ideological construct — and to play an active and critical role in reading.

Ann-Marie MacDonald's texts are rife with self-reflexivity, and her stories use numerous strategies to destabilize forms and meanings that have become second nature to readers. Her comment on Kathleen's first trip to New York in *Fall On Your Knees* can be read as an announcement of her own postmodern project: "[i]f anyone can do this, she can: a classically trained girl with modern ideas about holding a mirror up to nature" (123). MacDonald might as well be describing her own artistic

intentions: she writes to reflect the “natural” back on itself within a new construct. To this end, she employs numerous strategies of self-reflexivity, issuing constant reminders that her readers are reading an ideologically constructed text. *Fall On Your Knees*, for example, deploys numerous “sub-literary” forms, including mass cards (140, 150), letters (412), and page decorations (176-77, 235, 279, 412) as devices to disrupt narrative flow and foreground the text as a culturally rooted product. MacDonald achieves similar effect by rhythmically altering the points of view and verb tenses of the novel, jarring the reader’s comfortable pace of reading. All of these rhetorical strategies interrupt the reader’s complacent acceptance of the story at face value. They encourage consideration of the “constructedness” of all writing — including her own.

Though MacDonald subverts traditional textual forms, she simultaneously uses them to launch her own. She makes judicious use of literary forms in a way that interrogates the notion of final answers, celebrating, even as she parodies them, the text-making gestures of detective stories, myths, and the Gothic, among others. She further complicates this *mélange* of generic forms by regularly changing the point of view. Events are recorded from several perspectives as her novel re-tells stories time and again. There is no “right” answer in the search

for meaning in MacDonald's work — valuable meaning is found in the reader's construction of the text as it is seen through the eyes of many. As she asserts in *Fall On Your Knees*, a single person's point of view is not reliable: ". . . memory plays tricks. Memory is another word for story, and nothing is more unreliable"(270).

In addition to unsettling the text's narrative flow, MacDonald questions gender and social roles to foreground their marginalizing power. In *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, for example, she inverts gender roles by having her heroine, Constance Ledbelly, play both male and female roles in the Shakespearean tragedies of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*. Her strategy forces a reconsideration of traditional masculine and feminine behaviours. Similarly, in *The Arab's Mouth*, MacDonald assigns the traditionally feminine characteristics of infirmity and weakness to Victor, the heroine's brother, and the masculine traits of scientific curiosity and strength of will to the heroine, Pearl. Her strategies are not subtle: they confront the reader's unquestioned assumptions head-on.

By means of systematic inversions and subversions, MacDonald's writing unpacks the ideologies of the cultures that produce texts and readers. Her project is thus postmodern, in that it seeks to give authority

and voice to characters who might formerly have been marginalized, such as little girls (*Fall On Your Knees*) and female academics (*Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*), and by making the reader a responsible participant in the text-making process. Her work is self-conscious, self-referential, and actively subversive — hallmarks of the postmodern.

Feminism

Not coincidentally, the feminist movement came to be widely embraced by academics and non-academics alike in the same decade that saw the flowering of postmodernism — the sixties. Consistent with postmodernism's general attention to the relations between ideology and literature, feminism seeks particularly to empower women, a group traditionally marginalized by popular culture and literature. Drawing on postmodern theories of language and culture, feminists have elaborated many ways in which our modes of communication are dictated by gender bias:

Women artists have been creating patterns that present an alternative structuring to the traditional 'masculine' patterns of individualism, voyeurism, competition, combat, and apocalypse. (Dvorak 129)

Feminist writing, like postmodern writing, uses parody and self-referentiality to interrogate the status quo:

Postmodern parodic strategies are often used by feminist artists to

point to the history and historical power of . . . cultural representations, while ironically contextualizing both in such a way as to deconstruct them. (Hutcheon, *PoP* 102)

Because the ideological goals of postmodernism and feminism intersect at many points, they share a number of literary devices and strategies. But there are important differences, too, in their approaches. One such is feminism's greater emphasis on the authority of the *collective*. As Andrea Lebowitz has stated, "[a] constant of feminist literary criticism is the success of collaborative work" (6).

The authority of the collective is a major element of MacDonald's feminist literary project. This comes in part from her own literary background, which began in the collaborative world of the theatre. In writing for the theatre, MacDonald discovered that the playwright plays just one of the many roles in the "writing" of the text — with the stage manager, the director, and the actors all playing vital roles in bringing the story to life (Gzowski 1998). This collaborative approach is very important to feminist theatre in particular. In Canadian women's theatre collectives, groups of artists work together to bring each others' work to the stage:

These artists have set up an interdependent networking in which a woman who takes part in another's collective creation or scripted play eventually produces her own play, taking care to involve other women from the original working group. Ric Knowles, who has

worked with Nova Scotia's Mulgrave Road Co-op Theatre, has detected a pattern of cultural production that has emerged, which allows both the theatre workers and their audiences to 'take possession of their cultural (re)production, including the construction of gender'. (Dvorak 128)

This empowerment of the collective accords with an aesthetic of multiple authorship and the layering of voices that is an aim of some feminist artists. Many feminist writers, most notably members of women's collectives, posit the multi-centered, multi-voiced text as a desirable vehicle for the expression of female experience. Dvorak identifies this practice in MacDonald's work:

From a study of *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* with its politics of substitution and pattern of reversal that we have proffered as the exemplification of feminist dramatic comedy, we can see that the perspective is not so much woman-centred as multi-centred, not exclusive but open. (133)

Many feminist texts embrace multiplicity and inclusivity. A text that is constructed collectively changes as each participant brings a new voice to it. Thus, one goal of many feminist artists is a fluid and dynamic text, nourished by the voices of multiple participants:

Feminist literary critics and writers are often more interested in processional forms than in closed or fixed forms. They seek a way of speaking and writing which can express change, variation and inconsistencies. Underlying this search is the observation that identity is not determined and fixed once and for all, but is rather in process. More fluid and fragmentary forms may offer ways of expressing this condition. (Lebowitz 21)

In addition to idealizing a living text-making process, the feminist writer

seeks to subvert gender bias. For her part, MacDonald undermines conventional gender roles by putting characters in situations in which their actions contravene what might be an expected gender “norm”, for example, her re-positioning of Shakespeare’s Desdemona as a force of power in *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*.

MacDonald takes these reversals one step further by parodying traditional patriarchal texts and structures. In *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, she takes on the constructs and characters of Shakespearean tragedy to build a decidedly inclusive and feminist text. In *Fall On Your Knees*, she lampoons the stories and teachings of the Roman Catholic church. As an institution resented by many feminists for its refusal to grant women equal rights, the Catholic church is a meaningful target for the feminist MacDonald’s subversive arrow.

Marta Dvorak has described the female text as “narratively disruptive and often multi-centered” (132) — a description that accurately describes MacDonald’s feminist strategy. Her work seeks to destabilize an unthinking acceptance of gender roles in the text, and embraces strategies of subversion, collectivity, and interrogation. Feminism presents an opportunity to make literature accessible to more readers than ever before:

“Feminists are no longer thought of as sporting bad clothes, [or being] humourless and boring,” says MacDonald. Today, feminism is “not a straitjacket, it’s very liberating, it means inclusiveness,” she says. MacDonald believes that feminism is no longer a minority issue, that women have come to the forefront. “Now feminism invites everyone to the table”. (Teo 34)

Reconstructionism

Because her consistent emphasis is on widening and opening the text to multiple meanings, Ann-Marie MacDonald’s strategy resonates with the work of the reconstructionists, who portray the meaning-making process as a collective and fluid one:

[L]anguage is indeed ambiguous, but whereas deconstruction would highlight this ambiguity as the inability of words to convey precise meaning, Bakhtin welcomes this vagueness of language as a means by which to create meaning dialogically. (Honeycutt 3)

For Bakhtin, as for MacDonald, meaning is created through encounters in language between the text and its literary and social contexts, and between authors and their readers. In Bakhtin’s theory of discourse, the “dialogic” is “formed by the different meaning within and between utterances” (Hohne ix).

Bakhtin’s theory is attractive to both postmodern and feminist theorists for many reasons:

[I]t is an aesthetic that is attractive in its anti-authoritarianism and its pluralism, seeing the novel as the form which most persistently overturns the claim to speak with the voice of authority and to say the final word. (Dentith 64)

Dialogic theory is particularly useful to many feminist projects because of its emphasis on “celebrating, highlighting, bringing to the fore the vitalizing force” of “the incorporation and interweaving of various voices to create a sum far greater and more generative than the parts” (Hohne viii): Bakhtin’s approach posits the dual and interdependent roles of author and reader in the text-making process. Suzanne Rosenthal Shumway has summarized the relationship between Bakhtinian theory and feminism by pointing out that

. . . both theoretical systems value heterogeneity and diversity; feminism and Bakhtinian theory share a concern for the oppressed and marginalized others created by the hegemony of dominant, authoritarian, and ‘internally persuasive’ languages. This celebration of diversity — of heterogeneity (feminist theory) and of heteroglossia (Bakhtinian theory) — allows for a rich dialogue between the two theoretical systems. (153)

Reconstructionist texts seek to include marginalized groups by engaging in dialogue with *their* realities and contexts. The value in the exercise is that meaning is created when the various worlds of experience enter into discourse with one another. Shepherd quotes Bakhtin from *Discourse in the Novel*:

“Active understanding . . . by bringing what is being understood within the new horizon of the understander, establishes a number of complex interrelations, consonances and dissonances with what is being understood, enriches it with new moments. . . . The speaker seeks to orient his discourse with its own determining horizon within the alien horizon of the understander and enters into dialogic relations with moments of that horizon. The speaker penetrates the alien horizon of the listener, constructs his

utterance on alien territory, against his, the listener's, apperceptive background." (92)

The discourse Bakhtin describes becomes inclusive, since the moment "others" are addressed, their languages and contexts are included in the making of meaning. This inclusive discourse in Bakhtin's theory is called heteroglossia:

Heteroglossia . . . was for Bakhtin the ideal condition, guaranteeing a perpetual linguistic and intellectual revolution which guards against the hegemony of any 'single language of truth' or 'official language' in a given society, against ossification and stagnation in thought. (Clark 22)

For obvious reasons, Bakhtin's theory speaks strongly to the strategies of recent feminists, and particularly Ann-Marie MacDonald.

MacDonald's work is heteroglot. As David Creelman has stated,

Whatever style of narration is employed, the text is always focalized through the eyes of particular characters. By sticking close to the points of view of individual characters and foregoing an omniscient perspective, MacDonald avoids the impression that there is a single 'correct' interpretation of events.

MacDonald employs multi-vocal (and multi-focal) narrative to keep the text fluid, and to prevent readers from becoming complacent voyeurs.

She forces them to evaluate the authority of each narrator. MacDonald also casts her net further out, employing multiple languages and myriad dialects (like the meeting of Shakespearean language with Constance Ledbelly's twentieth-century vernacular in *Goodnight Desdemona (Good*

Morning Juliet) within her texts.

MacDonald eschews the single-voiced, single-languaged text in favour of embracing textual fluidity and *including* as many realities as there may be interpretive readers. Constant evolution and the rejection of stasis are fundamentally important to MacDonald, as is the struggle to widen the scope of the text. Bakhtin's reconstructionist theory of discourse both reflects the postmodern and feminist drives to unseat the hegemonic and oppressive realities of the text, and provides strategic means to focus on an alternatively inclusive and supportive discourse. Bakhtin's dialogic presents an opportunity to interrogate standing constructs, while building on them to include wider (and formerly marginalized) audiences.

Ann-Marie MacDonald's literature of inclusion thus reflects elements of postmodernism, feminism, and reconstructionism. Her primary concerns echo the issues those three theoretical schools share — the reconsideration of literary assumptions and the power relationships inherent in the text-making process. Her tactics, too, resonate with all three, as she makes rich use of self-reflexivity and parody in building her texts. The balance of this paper will examine three strategies that are particularly important in MacDonald's project. The

first of these, her use of language, will be the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter Two:

MacDonald's Use of Language

MacDonald's use of languages is one of the most important devices she employs to foster inclusiveness in her work. Embracing multiplicity in her texts, she undermines the perceived authority of one language (the primary language of the text) by opening up communications in others, both verbal and non-verbal, to introduce the different meanings that other peoples' perceptions can bring. The result is an inclusive, interactive text, which seeks to bring "other" linguistic and cultural groups into the centre.

Languages play a number of roles in MacDonald's texts. They help define characters for the reader (as they help characters define themselves within her fictions), and they act as agents of both exclusion and inclusion. In addition to multiple spoken languages, MacDonald also introduces non-verbal systems of communication, perhaps the most significant of which is music. This chapter will examine, first, the way MacDonald uses language to define the characters' cultural responses, for her readers and for themselves. Then, it will go on to study language's dual role as an agent of inclusion and exclusion. Finally, it will examine the way MacDonald uses language to open discourse, both between

characters and between herself and her readers.

It is impossible to ignore language's role in character definition when examining MacDonald's work. She uses the "otherness" of foreign languages to question the definitions characters assign to one another — and to illuminate how language affects her characters' images of themselves. The heroine of *The Arab's Mouth*, for example, is a late nineteenth-century Scot whose vocabulary often reads much like today's North American vernacular:

PEARL: There's no lack of culture in Edinburgh, Victor. It's a world-class city with a bit of everything: arts, sciences, garlic in mid-winter if you enjoy that sort of thing, and you know Rory MacGregor, Ginnie MacGregor's cousin? He's become a *nihilist*. What a waste.   (16)

But when Pearl becomes upset, a much thicker brogue comes out in her speech:

PEARL: You stupid boy! Ye stippit wee brat! Ye've smashed ma stone! Ye've ruined ma work! Who's goin' to believe me now, eh? Ye worthless eedjit!   (36)

MacDonald uses Pearl's slippages between one form of her language ("standard North American" English) and another (regional dialect) to show how both can be meaningful for different aspects of her experience, and to give the reader an insight into her subconscious attempts at self-definition. Pearl's self-perception as a scientific and rational woman, as

introduced through her objective discussion with Flora about the circumstances of Grandfather MacPhail's death (10-12), is reflected in her use of language that has a contemporary ring. However, as the play's action brings her to confront issues that are beyond the control of science — for example, the fact that Victor smashes the priceless stone whose messages she seeks to decode — her language reverts to a dialect that reflects her frustration with the inability of science to make a difference. Readers are confronted with the question of how we control language in an attempt to direct the ways others perceive us — and, through Pearl's slips into her dialect, how little control we sometimes have. As MacDonald has stated in an interview,

when [Pearl is] being rational and progressive and a new woman, she sounds contemporary. But when she's really motivated emotionally, she reverts, the way we often do, to our true colours. To something much older, and more culturally based, more tribal. (Lockhart v)

MacDonald invites her reader to consider the reasons for Pearl's linguistic switches by foregrounding the role her subconscious plays in her choice of language. Readers learn more about each character by considering that character's own relationship to language — and benefit from the new insights flowing from that consideration.

In *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, MacDonald draws attention to heroine Constance Ledbelly's linguistic "difference" in the

Elizabethan world of the plays-within-the-play by highlighting the gaps between her language and that of the characters around her. In an exchange with Othello and Desdemona, Constance's vocabulary betrays a twentieth-century sensibility that presents a challenge to communication with her Elizabethan counterparts:

DESDEMONA: Brave ag'ed maid, to wander all alone!
 CONSTANCE: I'm really more of an armchair traveler. In fact this is the biggest trip I've made. I've only ever gone on package tours. (33)

Constance's references to armchair traveling and package tours are meaningless to Desdemona, so her language identifies her as an "outsider" in Desdemona and Othello's world. This "difference" is further underlined in the text when the dislocation between the two languages causes Shakespeare's characters to misunderstand Constance. When she employs the twentieth-century usage "In some strange way this beast seems so familiar"(47), Iago interprets the word "familiar" through the filter of its meaning in his day — and assumes she refers to the demonic spirit that accompanies a witch: "Familiar! Yet again 'familiar! Most potent witch to suckle such a beast!"(47). In an even more dramatic example, Iago responds to Constance's request that her "foolscap" (paper) be found by producing the severed head of a fool (39).

MacDonald's purpose in inserting such comic misunderstandings

is more than a simple attempt to inject levity into serious scenes. Rather, she uses them to challenge the reader's conception of how constitutive of meaning language is. Regardless of whether the miscommunication originates with Constance or with Shakespeare's characters, MacDonald's strategy resonates clearly with reconstructionist thought: since two speakers of the same language can have difficulty understanding one another because of different meanings that have been attributed to words through *social evolution*, meaningful communication is only attained when each speaker listens to the other in the other's own terms. Later in the play, MacDonald gives an example of just that: when Constance defines "bullshit" at Desdemona's request, the word becomes a battle cry for the two women (41). Here, the result of the collision between the two women's languages is liberation.

MacDonald also signals how Constance makes use of the language of her new environment to communicate in a way that is meaningful to her audience, thus helping them understand through shared discourse. Specifically, she gives Constance the ability to effortlessly (yet consciously) speak in iambic pentameter. In her final scene with Desdemona and Juliet, Constance says:

Life is ...
                   a harmony of polar opposites,
                   with gorgeous mixed-up places in

between,
 where inspiration steams up from a rich
 Sargasso stew that's odd and flawed and
 full
 of gems and worn-out boots and sunken
 ships—

Desdemona, I thought you were different: I
 thought you were my friend, I worshipped you.
 But you're just like Othello — gullible and
 violent. Juliet, if you really loved me, you
 wouldn't want me to die. . . . I must have been a
 monumental fool to think that I could save you
 from yourselves . . . Fool . . .

DESDEMONA: Nay, thou speakst wise.

JULIET: Aye, fools were never wise.

DESDEMONA: Could any fool reveal, how we were wont to err?

JULIET: Or get us to concede, what we will gladly swear?
 (85)

Embracing Shakespeare's iambic pentameter and language allows
 Constance to finally get her voice heard in her new environment, and
 endows her with the ability to really, finally, communicate with
 Desdemona and Juliet. This, in turn, quickly gives her access to the
 answer to the mystery she has been investigating throughout the play:
 that is, the identity of the author. Language that invokes and
 incorporates the language spoken by others is the base from which
 meaningful communication comes, both because it addresses the "other"
 and because it allows the speaker to graduate from the language of
 monologue to that of discourse. For MacDonald,

to speak a language is to allow the language and the memory of all
 the people who ever created the language or who keep it alive. It's
 to channel a whole culture, to allow yourself to be shaped, however
 subtly. Language is a personality, a character, in my book. So

when [Constance] speaks in iambic pentameter she's entering into the culture . . . (interview with Lockhart vi)

MacDonald's portrayal of language as both cultural instrument and signifier is not restricted to her plays. In *Fall On Your Knees*, she creates a number of characters whose use of language signals strong ties to the cultural groups with which they align their own identities.

Language constitutes an integral element of personhood, of identity, for many of the central characters, and is tied to their most essential emotions and personal truths. James Piper expresses this very early in the novel. In the first days of his marriage to Materia, he "sang her a Gaelic lullaby which made him cry because, if such a thing was possible, he loved her more in his mother tongue" (15). MacDonald has filled the novel with languages, and each is presented as more than a tool for communication — it constitutes self and structures of feeling, valuing and thinking. In an interview, MacDonald articulates the intimate human relationship with languages:

They are repositories, emotional repositories, repositories of history. If you grow up speaking one language at home and another on the outside world, you'll have a whole range of friends and important people [who speak the second language] . . . but there will be places in your heart and mind that are only accessed via the first language, the old language, the emotional language, the childhood language. (Lockhart ii-iii)

Language is indeed a repository of history and emotion in *Fall On Your*

Knees. Frances accesses the memory of her sisters' common ancestry by singing "long story songs that our ancestors sang on the boats coming over in other languages" (274), music and words that evoke the experiences and hardships of a people. When James chooses to sing his lullaby to his new wife in Gaelic, he accesses a part of his innermost feelings that can only be reached through his first language. Further, when Lily begs Frances to stop speaking Arabic when threatening to leave her (450), she betrays the deep connection between language and what is fundamentally important to her. Lily cannot bear the thought of losing Frances — a thought made that much more painful when it is coupled with the articulations of a language that stirs deep feelings of home and comfort. A further example of this is the Piper girls' understanding of Arabic as "something just between them and Mumma. . . [the] private at-home language" (87). The first language of home is not just a means of communication for the girls, but also a haven where they are safe from the threatening forces that exist outside of their close relationship. For Lily, in particular, Arabic provides a feeling of power:

Inshallah is Lily's magic word. It is from the language that she knows ought not to be used by day except in an emergency. Because the words are like wishes from a genie — don't waste them. Lily has not even a rudimentary understanding of Arabic; it is, rather, dreamlike. At night in bed, long after lights-out, she and Frances speak the strange language. Their bed language. (242-243)

Language is also an implement of power within different cultural worlds throughout *Fall On Your Knees*. From the very outset of the story, when James' mother ensures that he speaks proper English so that he will be able to make his way in the British Empire (7), Scottish is characterized as a language to be left behind in favour of the language of the majority. True to this cultural imperative, James goes on to enforce the use of English as the only language to be used with his prized daughter, Kathleen. Arabic, the delicious secret language that empowers the Piper girls both in its ability to include them and to exclude the outside world, is also a dirty secret for James. Language is a powerful cultural tool: it conveys cultural truths in its own expression, over and above the actual constitutive meaning of its words.

MacDonald goes to great lengths in the novel to explore the power languages have to shape or modify character. The vital tie between language and identity is clearly illuminated when Mahmoud considers the difference between his mother tongue and English. He thinks about what it means to be

in the new country, where you open wide your arms to a brother from home who speaks the same beautiful language as you. The same shapely humorous language with earth and water in it. What a relief it is to sit down to a meal or a game of cards with someone, a Jameel for example, who shares this language. What a relief from the chill of English, which is exactly like immersing your tongue in ice-water. (327)

Mahmoud, who considers English chilling, has himself become cold enough in the new world to turn a daughter away because of her choice of husband. James Piper, who says that as a child “English always felt flat and harsh, like daylight after night-fishing” (7), eventually represses his discomfort with the language in much the same way he represses his true feelings about his wife and daughters. Here and throughout the novel, MacDonald shows how language plays a major role in shaping cultural response, because the ways characters relate to their languages also mirror the ways they relate to each other.

Foreign languages are used to communicate integral parts of MacDonald’s stories. From the Gaelic (60), Latin (69) and Greek (79) of *The Arab’s Mouth*, to the French and Latin (71) of *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, to the multitude of languages spoken in *Fall On Your Knees*, MacDonald’s characters speak and think in languages that are not necessarily understood by her readers. Only the reader with a working knowledge of at least seven languages (English, German (28), Yiddish (29), Arabic (33), Italian (36), French (66), and Latin (171)), can understand every word of MacDonald’s novel. This is an important point, because it forces readers to accept the relativity of their own cultural positioning. At the same time, however, MacDonald ensures that her

readers are not alienated from her texts: her readers' ignorance of these languages is compensated for by other means of communication, such as enhanced context and explanation. In MacDonald's own words:

I try to allow the reader the experience of the intimacy of the mother tongue as well, by allowing them to understand what must have been said just now. I don't want them not to understand. I want them to take it for granted that the language changed, and that they got it, because three lines later, all was revealed. And that they were a part of it. . . . It actually allows us to go into those places that are sealed off. (interview with Lockhart iv)

That said, however, MacDonald's project to foster inclusiveness through language doesn't ignore the exclusionary propensities of language. In *Fall On Your Knees*, characters use languages to keep one another at a personal distance. This is evident from the very beginning of the novel, when James and his mother leave his father on the outside of their relationship by speaking Gaelic: "[i]t used to make his father angry when James and his mother spoke Gaelic together, for his father spoke only English"(7). This continues throughout the novel as James becomes alienated by his wife and daughters' use of Arabic as the "private at-home language"(87). James' father's hatred emerges in him when he forbids Materia to speak any language other than English to his precious Kathleen (35). MacDonald encourages her reader to recognize how the silencing of a language necessarily shuts out the experience of a range of emotions, as when James is left out of his daughters' lives because he

refuses to participate in (or acknowledge) their experiences that are framed in Arabic. She foregrounds the personal rewards of the girls' use of Arabic, and parallels that positive feeling with the coldness that comes with James' muting of the language. Without language to access their innermost feelings, memories and experiences, characters risk losing the ability to fully experience the events that are the raw material of their lives. This exposition of language's power to enable experience or disable community challenges readers to recognize the alienation inherent in any attempt to posit a single language as authoritative or sufficient.

Throughout *Fall On Your Knees*, characters are caught between linguistic worlds, and find the different languages in their lives clashing with their perceptions of reality. On her deathbed, for example, Kathleen confuses her mother's recitation of the "Hail Mary" with an indecipherable speech in tongues (136). When James hauls Frances out of the pool behind the house the night of Kathleen's death, she is unable to tell her father that Ambrose is underwater because "she's forgotten how to say it in waking English"(149). And when Camille wakes Mahmoud out of a dream about Giselle, "He's speaking Arabic but she replies in English to help him back to his senses"(340). In all of these instances, MacDonald reflects on the inadequacy of a single language to constitute and convey the full range of human experience.

MacDonald also shows how a language's ability to exclude one person can also make others feel that much more included. In all her major works, characters use languages other than English to augment communication — literally, to bring the benefits of other discourses into their own, to make their experiences richer. By incorporating different languages in her texts, MacDonald necessarily introduces other verbal registers to the narrative. As the reader is first alienated by the existence of a foreign language in the text but then comes to understand what has been said, a subconscious realization is born: the multi-linguistic voices of different cultures form a new and exciting part of the reading. Her writing fosters cultural inclusiveness by presenting different languages to new audiences.

In MacDonald's work, language stirs emotions from deep below the rational, conscious mind, and brings a personal liberation that can only come through discourse. Early in *Fall On Your Knees*, James and Materia's cultural and linguistic backgrounds meet in a discourse that augments their physical relationship: "It was when she said his name in her soft buzzy way that his desire first became positively carnal"(13). For James, the "buzzy way" of Materia's Arabic speech patterns opens him up to experience, realizing drives that his culturally-inflected Scottish

language has differently socialized and, in fact, repressed. Linguistic communication is heightened as Materia's buzzy language meets James' Scottish burr. The feelings that come to James as a result of Materia's culture are impossible to conjure in the Scottish discourse that constitutes him: his experience of love is thus enhanced by language.

The author further ties language to the deep stirrings of personhood when she evokes the power of Ginger's secret name, which "must not be written down"(372). The name Adelaide uses in the confines of the marriage bed is as sacred to her and to Ginger as is the name of God to religions that do not allow it to be written, even in scripture. The power of words thus goes far beyond mere reflection of the outside world. Whether it be a secret bedtime language, a culturally-rooted "buzzy way", or the mystery of a secret name, MacDonald shows how language is not simply descriptive, but actually *constitutive* of meaning, both for her characters and her reader. The readers' inter-active engagement with the discourse of the novel is enriched as they experience the multiple voices (and the social histories with which the languages those voices speak are packed). Languages, as evidenced in this novel, are profoundly implicated in culture-specific structures of feeling and selfhood. They are fundamental to the "natural" but culturally and ideologically masked desirability of a multiplicity of discourses that enable a richer, fuller

range of possibilities for realizing our full humanity.

MacDonald's exploration of language is not limited to verbal expression: she pays particular attention to the ways in which non-verbal language helps expand the communication between characters. Her portrayal of Hector, for example, shows that non-verbal language is just as important to full discourse as are language-bound forms of communication. She urges her reader to consider Hector's mute eloquence, and forces an acceptance of the ways in which discourse can be achieved without words. In another example, Frances communicates with Trixie, the cat, through a sort of extra-sensory language (373). MacDonald thus elaborates on a recurring reconstructionist theme of her writing: communication is achieved when the experiences and realities of different characters come into contact *and react* with one another. It is not enough to recognize that different people use language in different ways: MacDonald's project shows how narratives (and cultures) that are restricted to discourses that exclude intuition and the "inarticulate" natural world do not actually "hear" all their own truths. She gives us characters who learn that there is as much "truth" outside of their realm of articulated experience as there is within it, and that the only way to achieve full discourse is to explore other modes of communication.

The most important of MacDonald's non-verbal languages in *Fall On Your Knees* is, perhaps, the language of music. Lorna Jackson writes of the novel that

. . . [a]long with the saga comes . . . a map of the evolution of music at the turn of the century: from Victorian ditty through Puccini opera, speakeasy honky tonk, and Harlem gospel and blues. (29)

Music, like verbal language, plays a number of active roles in both plot and character development. Music's first appearance in the novel, when James' father dismantles his mother's piano, is as absence (8). This defining moment foreshadows James' future identity as a lover (and, in his mind, defender) of music, and sets up a duality between music's affirmation as an enriched, complementary means of expression and its denial as a privilege that can be silenced. Even within the many scenes in the novel in which musical expression is allowed, there are hints that, like verbal language, it can constrain expression as much as it enables it: Rose, for example, equates playing scales to playing "in harness"(126). This is an explicit comparison of music to language, reflecting on how culturally-produced discourses effectively discipline and structure languages (and therefore speakers), and on how their techniques, to some extent, determine expression. Rose seeks the freer discourse of jazz, which isn't constrained within rules of measurement and order, but

rather celebrates nonconformity and innovation. As Kathleen begins to appreciate and embrace Rose's musical discourse, her own music changes: it takes on elements of that different discourse and incorporates them. Kathleen's own conception of her musical language is liberated after she engages in musical discourse with Rose:

. . . why do I want to be caged on a stage when the real singers are out here, singing about fish, hollering out rhythm across wheelbarrows full of fruit to the timpany of tin pan alley, a chorus of trams, horseshoes, knives and live animals, this is where the opera is. The Met is a mausoleum. The music room is a funeral parlour. God I don't want to wind up in a museum. (464)

In *Fall On Your Knees*, music heightens the enjoyment and effectiveness of communication for its creator (or "speaker") as much as it does for the listener. Kathleen, the novel's first musical prodigy, sings even before she is able to speak (36). Frances, her little sister, plays the piano to help her imagine (242), and Materia, their mother, plays the piano at the theatre, to bring musical storytelling to movies that would otherwise be silent: she "had the vaudeville and the picture shows and she was happy as long as she could play" (53). Music is an especially powerful tool of expression for Rose, who thinks of it in much the same way Michelangelo is said to have conceived of sculpture.

She thinks music is already out there floating around and it's up to us to give it an opening into our world so we can hear it. As though the world were full of music we can't hear with "the naked ear". (479)

Music is an intimate communication for Rose, which the self shares with itself, and only its product — the sound — is accessible to the outsider. When Kathleen goes to visit Rose at home, she is told that Rose is very strict about not being disturbed (507). While a listener only hears the result (the sound) of her music, for Rose the process of creating it is just as important. The creation of music is the embodiment of a human possibility in itself: to be interrupted mid-melody is to be interrupted mid-thought. The author thus shows how important a means of expression — and self-realization — music can be for her characters.

The portrayal of music as both constitutive and revealing of her characters' inner lives is very deliberate on MacDonald's part:

[I'm interested in] the idea of the voice being the soul, of music being sacramental somehow, and also forbidden. It's very, very powerful. So when Frances plays those trashy tunes it's a major rebellion. . . . and when Mercedes sits down to play, it's the music of denial. It's the music of "let's smooth everything over." When Materia plays it really unnerves James, because it's her own homemade, incipient jazz, it's bad stuff, it's the whole empire, it's our entire way of life starting to unravel in ragtime. (MacDonald, interview with Lockhart vii)

James, who has difficulty expressing himself verbally, plays only a few bars of any piece before stopping (20). Materia, whose communication with her children is a mix of English and Arabic, plays music that is a jumble of pieces and tempos (23). While Mercedes, the strictly obedient

daughter, plays Royal Conservatory pieces, her wild sister Frances plays by ear (185); she even pulls the rolls out of the player piano so as not to have her music confined (292) on a script written by another person. Significantly, Frances switches to playing more conventional, “disciplined” pieces once she becomes pregnant and wishes to bring her life into new harmony (429, 437). Perhaps most importantly, Rose, the musical free spirit who introduces Kathleen to the jazz music that allows her to really *feel* the expression of music, refuses to write her compositions “[b]ecause then you kill the bird”(483). To Rose, discourse (expressed musically) cannot be dictated or constrained in any way, as that would make it less “true.” Having one musician play the prescribed notes of another would be tantamount to taking the life out of the music: all speakers must speak from their own experiences if true communication is to be achieved.

Indeed, music is privileged as more than an alternative discourse.

MacDonald has spoken of it as the novel’s principal structuring device:

[W]hen I was writing this book, I conceived of it as a musical. . . . Not just because I use music in it, but because the whole thing should be and is musical. And I wrote it in three movements, and there are leitmotifs that recur, and it’s symphonic in a sense, but also it’s musical in the sense of language. . . . Because it has to work rhythmically. And I think that’s it, really, there’s a sense of the plot and the characters progressing along with the music of the century. (interview with Lockhart vii)

MacDonald's wide embrace of different forms of verbal and non-verbal expression accords with her focus on multi-centricity, and her drive to bring myriad forms of communication into the "centre" of the characters' (and the reader's) worlds. Her statement about the private language the Piper girls share in *Fall On Your Knees* can be taken as representative of her underlying conception of the role of language:

Frances uses half-remembered phrases and tells fragments of old stories, weaving them with pieces of songs, filling in the many gaps with her own made-up words that approximate the sounds of Mumma's Old Country tongue. Lily converses fluently in the made-up language, unaware which words are authentic, which invented, which hybrid. The meaning resides in the music and the privacy of their magic carpet bed. (243)

The last sentence of this passage is fundamentally important to MacDonald's vision, and illustrates the harmonies between her project and the reconstructionist one. Through language, characters are defined, their experiences are brought into the centre, and new discourses are opened both between characters *and* between author and reader.

The inclusiveness born of the use of multiple languages is a goal shared by postmodern, feminist and reconstructionist theorists alike. MacDonald's strategy aligns itself with all three theoretical schools, as different cultural groups are afforded the freedom to express themselves

on their own terms within her stories. Her texts strive to bring disparate cultural, social and gender groups' realities into legitimacy.

Chapter Three:

The Role of Intertext

MacDonald urges her readers to challenge their pre-conceptions about the politics of language, a challenge that is fundamental to the postmodern, feminist and reconstructionist modes of thought. As Katerina Clark has argued, and as *Fall On Your Knees* demonstrates, “The heteroglot novel . . . is skeptical of all languages that assume they are the only voice of truth” (292). This chapter will delve further into MacDonald’s exploration of more inclusive literary forms by examining her use of intertext. Intertext brings the reader into active dialogue with the story by invoking the realities and contexts of “other” groups. This inclusion of the reader as an active player in the dialogue is a very important element of her project, because it necessarily implies a heteroglossic, multi-centred text, one in which the reader’s background contributes to the making of stories. This chapter will also study how intertext encourages reader participation by recalling texts that are familiar.

By its very nature, intertext forces the reader to recognize the constructedness of the story. In the course of engaging the resonances of a previous text within the new one, readers draw their own connections

between the two. By deploying intertexts, the author not only invokes a new discourse through the “transplanted” voice, but also encourages the reader’s own culturally encoded experience to play a role in determining what meanings will be made when the intertext is read, or re-read, in dialogue with the text. Intertext, then, brings the reader into the process of writing — an act that is inherently political, and in Linda Hutcheon’s words, “specifically postmodern”:

What makes this obviously echoing form specifically postmodern is the paradoxical fact that it is precisely this intertextuality (as it is called today) that brings about a direct confrontation with the issue of the relation of art to the world outside it — to the world of those social, cultural, and ultimately ideological systems by which we all live our lives. (TCP 9)

Intertextual writing has an estranging effect on either or both of the host text and the imported text, bringing them into new perspective by foregrounding them as ideologically inflected cultural constructions. It has long been a favourite strategy of feminist texts, because it both questions naturalizing assumptions of dominant artistic discourses and simultaneously enacts the articulation of alternative experiences:

[Feminist] criticism is interdisciplinary in that it uses, often in revised form, information and tools from philosophy, linguistics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, history, religious studies, folklore and mythology to name only the most obvious areas. Since feminist scholars are working within all of these fields, feminist literary critics are very attentive to the work of other feminists and their revisions of traditional disciplines. . . . Beneath all of these investigations is a fundamental concern for

the way in which language affects our ability to know, express and change and the ways in which writing is shaped by gender (and the reverse). (Lebowitz 7)

Intertext can also be considered a feature of the heteroglot novel, largely because of its ability to bring outside voices into play. As Hohne and Wussow have observed,

Bakhtin would argue all languages are influenced by one another. There cannot be a 100 percent pure feminist criticism, just as there is no unalloyed Bakhtinian reading of literature. The importance is the simultaneous reaction, a lively dialogue between the heteroglossic languages. . . . (viii)

All discourse is intertextual at some level in reconstructionist theory, since no communication holds real meaning until the languages of two speakers come into relationship with one another. Heteroglot discourse is, therefore, by nature, intertextual:

As Bakhtin argues, novels are made up of different languages, each ideologically saturated and conveying the ideology — worldview, or “idea system” — of a particular speaking person, itself viewed as ideologically rather than psychologically constituted and motivated. Rather than conveying one ideology or worldview at the expense of others, what Bakhtin identifies as true novels bring ideologically saturated languages into dialogic contact with one another. (Schaffer 131)

Intertext’s value to the postmodern, feminist and reconstructionist projects is its strategy of inclusion. All of these theoretical projects converge at the point where the role of the reader is addressed, the point at which readers are forced to recognize the background assumptions

they bring to any text. Intertext allows the author to signal the text's constructedness, its inherent political nature, and its biases, while inviting readers to bring to bear on the text *their* knowledge of other works, cultural assumptions, sign systems and ideologies. The readers' specific social histories thus play a large and active role in what meanings are to be made from their readings.

Intertext plays a number of important roles in MacDonald's work, all of which urge readers to consider the chorus of voices at play, and to take active roles for themselves in constructing the story. She introduces intertexts from a myriad of sources, ranging from literal textual references to stylistic references to imagistic ones. The result, in every case, is an experience of the text that seems more welcoming and inclusive than what the reader may otherwise have expected. As Joan Thomas has argued,

[MacDonald] has found the language of the heart that runs below everyday discourse, found it in the phrases of Arabic and Gaelic the Pipers carry from childhood, and in the lines of *The Song of Solomon*, *In Flanders Fields*, *I'll Take You Home Again Kathleen* — even *My Darling Clementine*, skinning old words of their familiarity and taking us right to the longing that produced them.

By returning us to the origin of what has been made differently familiar by various cultures, MacDonald allows all readers to experience what is familiar, even as they become aware that the familiar is bound up with

the ideologies that inflect it. MacDonald has articulated her own motivation for making heavy use of intertext:

I want [readers] to have the cumulative effect of feeling as though they exist in a very layered world, full of references that could be theirs. And even if they weren't theirs, somehow they will enter into that strong memory that the characters have, that those references will *become* their references. Because every reader will have their reference points, but they won't necessarily be the ones that are invoked in the book. But if I invoke the ones that I use in the book in the right way, the reader will substitute their own. And there will be a sense of reminiscent richness. (interview with Lockhart, viii)

For MacDonald, intertext is primarily a tool to make her reader feel at home in her work — to make the reader feel included. Consistent with her stated aims, she is careful not to exclude readers who are rooted in the very traditions that she writes to enrich, since she has no desire to reject those traditions: hers is a discourse unmistakably meant to include anyone who cares to read her texts.

MacDonald employs a plethora of direct references to other works of literature and elements of popular culture to bring new meanings and voices to her stories. In *The Arab's Mouth*, for example, Pearl asks Flora to assume the pose of one of Greek mythology's Fates (12-13). In summoning the reader's knowledge of the Fates, MacDonald provides early evidence of Pearl's own belief systems: a rationally-driven scientist is juxtaposed with characters of an ancient tradition that attributed

control over the events of one's life to an outside power. The comparison encouraged by the intertext (and Pearl's own opinion of the concept of the Fates), allows for a better understanding of the character, and a recognition at the outset of the play that Pearl is a woman of rationality and logic. Flora's hinted reference to the 23rd Psalm: "This is the valley. Here is the shadow"(64) at Régine's grave betrays her seriousness and her perception of the severity of the children's situation. The reader who is familiar with the 23rd Psalm as a prayer for almighty support in times of greatest need recognizes the parallel, and wins a deeper understanding of Flora's feeling. In both of these examples, as in many others in her texts, MacDonald uses identifiable ideas and passages from outside texts and urges her readers to use them to inform their reading of her stories. Her writing is truly heteroglot, as the readers' conceptions of her writing are affected by the new elements of meaning introduced by the intertext.

MacDonald's textual references often work to question social assumptions, as is the case in *Fall On Your Knees* when they bring excluded and silenced groups into dialogue with official traditions. Perhaps the most powerful examples of this technique are her borrowings from biblical and religious passages. MacDonald uses lines and scenes that resonate with sacred passages and prayers — particularly for Catholics — in order to bring the Church's silenced

“others” into dialogue with its teachings.

Direct references to Christian prayers and imagery abound throughout the novel. For example, as Mercedes and Lily discuss their father, “Mercedes closes her hand around Lily’s. ‘Let us ask God to forgive him.’ ‘Because he knows not what he does’ says Lily” (378). Here, MacDonald has borrowed directly from the words of Jesus from the cross: “Then said Jesus, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do’” (Luke 23:34). MacDonald’s characterization of the saintly Lily is borne out in this passage — and strengthened by the reader’s recognition and association of the qualities of the speakers in both texts. This direct intertext is not simply a messianic characterization of Lily, however: it is also a means for MacDonald to gently question the literal interpretation of biblical stories which can allow believers to justify terrible acts. Whereas, in the Luke story, Christ asks God to forgive the people who are killing him because they don’t understand who he is, in *Fall On Your Knees* Lily uses the same words to ask God to forgive her father for molesting and beating her sister. The difference MacDonald underlines here is that James *knows full well* what he does.

Another significant example of MacDonald’s use of Catholic intertext to heighten her reader’s experience of the text is the chapter

entitled “Via Dolorosa” (353) (“the way of sorrow,” a name used to describe the path Christ traveled to his own crucifixion). This chapter features MacDonald’s chronicle of Frances’ sinful seduction of Ginger Taylor. In Catholic tradition, the “way of sorrow” is depicted in narrative and visual form through the fourteen stations of the cross, which list the primary events in Christ’s journey to crucifixion: Jesus is condemned to death, Jesus bears his cross, Jesus falls the first time, Jesus meets his mother, etc. (Flynn 476). The journey narrated in this chapter, however, is quite different: here, James chases Ginger, Adelaide pursues Frances, Boutros and Jameel die, and Frances and Ginger travel to the old French mine, where Frances will seduce Ginger and become pregnant out of wedlock. The juxtaposition of the two sets of “stations” makes the horror of the chapter that much more real, because it brings all of the reader’s emotions and impressions of Jesus’ sacrificial journey to crucifixion into play in a chapter full of revenge, hatred, and deceit.

MacDonald makes a different use of Catholic intertext when she describes Kathleen’s reaction to Sweet Jessie Hogan’s voice:

She drags her voice over gravel, then soothes it with silk, she crucifies, dies, buries and rises, it will come again to save the living and the dead. . . . (524)

She is, of course, drawing on the words of the “Apostles’ Creed” as it describes Jesus:

He was crucified, died, and was buried.
 He descended to the dead. On the third day, He rose again.
 He ascended into Heaven and is seated at the right hand of the
 Father.
 He will come again to judge the living and the dead. (Flynn 18)

This juxtaposition of the prayer with the sexuality of Hogan's voice uses the *difference* between the two to inform the reader's perception of the scene. The voice, to Kathleen, is as cathartic as the resurrection of a messiah — and the use of a convention of Catholic catechism to describe “forbidden pleasures” (lesbian and sexual desire) effectively forces the reader to examine the assumptions that go along with that Catholic presence. It is important to note, here, that MacDonald changes the words of the “Apostles' Creed” to give the epiphany that comes with Hogan's voice an even more rewarding result: whereas in the “Apostles' Creed” Christ will “come again to *judge* the living and the dead” [emphasis added], Sweet Jessie's voice will come again to *save* them. In juxtaposing the sexual response to the jazz singer's voice with Jesus' ultimate sacrifice, MacDonald urges readers to re-consider what really constitutes morality, and compare their answers with the Church's strict assumptions. This is how, through intertext, MacDonald so effectively questions the power the Church wields, and the exclusive ideologies it propagates.

MacDonald's direct references to other texts throughout the novel are not, however, restricted to religious ones. She scores the novel with well-known music, and invokes children's texts such as the Bobbsey twins (112) and Alcott's *Little Women* (199). She further employs direct references to poems such as MacRae's "In Flanders' Fields" (265), and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (548). In each instance, her aim is to bring the ideologies of each work into dialogue with her own. The result is text that lives and grows with the reader's knowledge of the external sources, and which is informed by the interplay between the texts. MacDonald has commented in an interview, "It's like just sounding a note, and implying that other piece of music. Maybe you know that piece of music, or maybe you know one like it" (Lockhart viii). By invoking notes the reader knows and finds familiar, MacDonald creates a textual space that is friendly and safe, a space where she can undermine ideologies that may be held close to the heart. It is through her intertexts that she makes it easy for her reader to consider and appreciate new voices.

If *The Arab's Mouth* and *Fall On Your Knees* use direct textual references to bring outside sensibilities to play in her texts (when readers draw on their knowledge of the other texts to inform their reading of hers), then *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* deploys

structural intertexts that interrogate dramatic forms themselves. In this play, an academic is transported through time and across ontological borders to the worlds of Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*:

Chunks of the original text (in italics) are subverted from their context and linearity and incorporated into the dialogue. . . . Her strategy is that of bathos: to deflate rather than to inflate, through anti-climax and the breaking of decorum by a prosaic, lowly, even scatological lexicon and abrupt shifts in diction. (Dvorak 130)

MacDonald's playful dance between the worlds of the Bard's plays and of her postmodern hero is a masterful display of intertext's ability to question the assumptions underlying modern readings of all three texts. Constance, who comes from a twentieth-century social background, is taken out of her world and trapped in a form, a metanarrative, which contrasts with hers. Essentially, Constance *becomes* intertext, as her words and actions bring the realities of her world to bear on the Shakespearean world she now faces.

The clash between Constance's world and the worlds of the plays provokes responses from both heroine and audience. Constance is forced to re-think the social context of much of her vocabulary, as she realizes how much of her speech Shakespeare's characters misunderstand because of the difference between their world and hers. The clash is perhaps even more meaningful, however, for MacDonald's audience: the reader's assumptions about social and gender roles in Shakespeare's

stories are challenged through the introduction of a modern-day woman. Constance's twentieth-century presence transforms Desdemona into a powerful figure, and Romeo loses some of his macho appeal.

"The Dumbshow" MacDonald offers by way of introducing the concept underlying *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* illustrates her intention to make the audience contemplate all three stories within the same set of contexts.

Act I, The Dumbshow

Three vignettes played simultaneously.

1 - Desdemona's bedchamber; OTHELLO murders DESDEMONA in her bed, by smothering her with a pillow.

2 - A crypt; ROMEO dead, JULIET unconscious on a slab. JULIET awakens, sees ROMEO, and kills herself with his rapier.

3 - Constance Ledbelly's office at Queen's University (13)

The play begins with concurrent representations of the dramatic climaxes of *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*, and Constance's frustration with her own station in life. These mini-scenes are more than a diversion for the audience: their simultaneity gives them an aura of equality, as none of them is foregrounded for the audience's attention. MacDonald puts Shakespeare's characters on the same stage, within the same time period, as Constance. As barriers between dramas are broken down, so are those between the audience's and the characters' social contexts. The fundamental intertext that underlies this play, which brings a twentieth-century woman into Shakespeare's fictional world, facilitates the

audience's own intellectual embrace of the characters and situations in his plays.

Marta Dvorak has argued that MacDonald's double-and triple-interference with Shakespeare's world introduces a new level of intertext, as occurs when Constance's entrance into the worlds of *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* is augmented by the cross-fertilization of characters from those two Shakespearean plays interacting with one another (133). Dvorak points out that the appropriation of voice in the play is a further intertextual leap: characters in MacDonald's play trade lines from Shakespeare's original texts. For example, in *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, when Desdemona says

If there be *cannibals that each other eat,*
and men whose heads do grow beneath their
shoulders? (41),

she is reciting lines that were Othello's in Shakespeare's tragedy:

And of the Cannibals that each [other] eat,
 The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
 [Do grow] beneath their shoulders. (*Othello* I.iii.142-144)

In giving Desdemona the words Othello spoke in Shakespeare's play to woo Constance with stories of worldly and dangerous accomplishments, and having her use them in seeking Constance's own exciting tales of battle in academe, MacDonald turns the machismo of *Othello* on its head. Not only is the intellectual struggle of the female academic in the

twentieth century paralleled with the physical danger of Othello's conquests, but the words of heterosexual flirtation are taken to a different plane when they are uttered by a woman flirting with another woman.

MacDonald further destabilizes character (and gender) definition when she uses intertext to re-assign some of the most well-known expressions of heterosexual love in all of literature. When Romeo utters Juliet's "*I'll kiss thy lips. Haply some hemlock yet doth hang on them*"(64), the gender roles of male dominance and female submission in heterosexual relationships are reversed. Whereas, in Shakespeare's play, Juliet would rather die than live without Romeo, here Romeo uses these words to demonstrate his homosexual devotion to Constantine. Then, when MacDonald allows Juliet to utter a re-writing of one of Romeo's most commonly-recognized speeches,

*But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?
It is the East, and Constantine the sun!* (68)

she uses Romeo's lines of heterosexual adoration to express Juliet's swooning love for Constantine — a woman disguised as a man.

MacDonald thus uses direct intertext to encourage her audience to ponder their perceptions of the differences between heterosexual and homosexual relationships. More importantly, the intertext urges the

recognition that there is no fundamental difference in the way these relationships are experienced by lovers: some of literature's most enduring expressions of heterosexual love are here applied to homosexual feelings — without any dampening of their impact.

MacDonald's supple prose is also rich with intertextual images that evoke complex associations. In addition to bringing new discourses into conversation with the reader's act of reading, these imagistic references make of MacDonald's texts a more destabilizing reading experience. In the photograph described on the second page of the novel, for example, the image of Materia's death scene echoes the fairy tale of "Hansel and Gretel," in which the witch is killed by putting her head in an oven: "Mercedes found her like that, half in and half out of the oven"(2). This early intertextual image embeds the mother in a discomfiting complex of emotional associations that continue to haunt the reader throughout the novel.

In describing James Piper's obsessive boot-shining in the army, the narrator says "James' superiors . . . call him 'Lady MacBeth'" (114). Here, in invoking the image of Lady MacBeth's obsessive scrubbing, MacDonald presents a re-consideration of James' own character. Just as Lady MacBeth scrubs away the invisible bloodstains that betray her

guilty conscience, James obsessively polishes his boots to obliterate his guilt over his incestuous desires and abuses of his daughters back home. MacDonald's decision to conjure the image of Lady MacBeth here, rather than to give a fuller explanation of the parallel, gives the reader an opportunity to recognize and appreciate the intertext on a visual rather than just an intellectual level. The effect is a more real, and more effective, interrogation for the reader.

In addition to employing intertextual images to enhance themes already at play in the novel, like James' conscious denial, MacDonald uses them to signal new ones. For example, when she describes the "black smudge" (163) on Mercedes and Frances' foreheads from Materia's touch in the night, MacDonald introduces the imagery of Ash Wednesday, and with it the notion of repentance. In the Ash Wednesday tradition, Church faithful write down the sins for which they seek forgiveness on pieces of paper that are collected and burned; the priest then marks each participant on the forehead with a cross, using the ashes from the burnt sins. That ashen cross is a symbol of the collective guilt and repentance all participants share. By invoking the image of the Ash Wednesday ritual, MacDonald signals the collective penance the Piper family will endure as their lives unfold.

In a similar way, later in the novel, biblical imagery unsettles perceptions of Frances' newfound serenity after she is shot by Teresa: "The head nurse's stitches . . . [have] been out for a month or so now, leaving only a shy smile below Frances' ribcage on her right side" (415). Here, MacDonald recalls the wound Jesus suffered after crucifixion: "But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs; but one of the soldiers opened his side with a lance" (John 19:33-34). Rather than compounding the ways the message is communicated, this intertextual image presents an opposing context. Whereas Jesus' wounds from crucifixion remind us of his sacrifice to save all humankind, Frances' wound is a souvenir of her own sin of seduction and betrayal. The difference between the contexts of the two similar images is dramatic, and underlines the hypocrisy of Frances' newfound self-identification. Through the jarring intertextual image, MacDonald prevents the reader from falling into the comfortable image of the pregnant woman as a "natural," wholly benevolent figure.

MacDonald similarly uses intertextual imagery in the novel to raise the issue of racial appropriation, when Lily appears in blackface: "Lily's face is black with coal except for a wide oval around her mouth" (259). Lily has been innocently doing a minstrel show in the basement with

Frances, and though Lily isn't presented as a racist character, the question of the whole role and effect of the minstrel shows of the 19th and early 20th centuries is raised. By imitating the white minstrels who parodied Blacks, Lily's action reflects the unthinking appropriation of minority voices that is characteristic of her (and our) culture. Though the little girl is unaware of the racial oppression enacted through the blackface tradition, that tradition forms a part of her cultural makeup and she expresses it as part of her natural behaviour. Thus, through intertextual images that operate at tangents to the narrative, MacDonald helps her readers make non-linear connections that both enhance their understanding of the story *and* effectively communicate the ideological re-readings she proposes.

The illustrations that decorate certain pages in the novel also use intertextual images to enrich the reader's experience of the story. Visually, they force readers to "read" more than the words — and to allow other sign systems into their perceptions of the world of the text. The illustrations bring symbolic and imagistic discourses into conversation with the words of the narrative — a truly postmodern form.

MacDonald asked friend Gina Wilkinson to illustrate certain pages of the New York storyline:

[A]ll the drawings belong to the diary excerpts and the little snippets of the New York story, which I wanted to frame as souvenirs, as something lost. Decorating them is a very old-fashioned thing to do — it looks like you've found them in a trunk. . . . There's a traditional, old-fashioned shape, structure, container, and new content. Unexpected, or surprising, or contemporary in opposition to the form. (MacDonald, interview with Lockhart, xiii)

A close examination of the illustrations shows that they give emotional context to the pages on which they appear. The bleeding heart, thorns, treble clef, Celtic cross, and roses that illustrate the page describing Kathleen and Rose's love scene (176) evoke love, pain, free expression, heritage and growth. The page describing the beginning of Rose and Kathleen's last night together in New York (308) is framed by an illustration of barbed wire, lips, naked women's hips, bottoms, and crotches, all held within staves of music. These images imply both the sense of sexual freedom the girls enjoy together and the danger implicit in it. By introducing these images in conjunction with these particular segments of the narrative, MacDonald brings an added level of non-verbal discourse to the story. The readers begin with the words on the page, then read those words in the specific context of the thoughts evoked by the images, and then complete the process with the addition of their own feelings as they are invoked by Wilkinson's drawings. Whereas MacDonald's *words* may have given the readers the option to experience the scene on one level, the drawings force a more subjective reading on

another. The images allow these scenes to be more powerfully understood on a personal level; they are, in these examples, extremely effective tools of inclusion.

Somewhat less frequently, though just as effectively, MacDonald's texts employ a stylistic form of intertext in which she borrows turns of phrase and narrative styles from other sources and infuses them with her own meanings. In postmodern fashion, these stylistic patterns signal the constructedness of the text, and force the reader's confrontation with the author's role as transcriber [and director] of the story. Through these stylistic intertexts, MacDonald opens her literary discourse to include other works with which her reader may be familiar, and thus also includes their interpretations of those outside texts.

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of this stylistic intertext, besides her appropriation of Shakespearean style and language in *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* as described in the previous chapter, is her choice of the language of fairy tales ("a long time ago, before you were born, there lived a family") to introduce the novel (7). The author's strategy, here, is not simply to begin a story in a style that evokes the reader's earliest conscious memories of narrative: her reference to "before you were born" invokes the sense of closeness that

comes when a child is read a story by a parent, while simultaneously implying that the reader might not be part of this story. At the outset of the novel, readers are outsiders. Their own memories and experiences, however, will increasingly make them part of the world of the text: in this sense, readers are led on a journey towards inclusion. Further, MacDonald's lightly parodic appropriation of fairy tale discourse signals a narrative structure that will underpin her story: like many fairy tales, *Fall On Your Knees* begins in a style that feels comfortable and familiar, but becomes much darker as it progresses. The ending of the narrative, though far from the cliché "and they lived happily ever after," does offer some light — and gives the reader reason to ponder the notion of what pre-conceived assumptions might constitute a typical happy ending. Just as many fairy-tale happy endings are reached after their protagonists suffer kidnapping, theft, murder, and a host of other unhappy experiences, MacDonald's ending proposes the possibility of a bright new beginning built on an understanding of the past. Finally reunited with Anthony in the last pages of the novel, Lily (now an older woman) says "Here, dear . . . sit down and have a cuppa tea till I tell you about your mother" (566). The difference the author underlines in bringing the fairy tale style to her novel is this: while most fairy tale heroes reach happy endings by way of casting off the shackles of the past (for example, Hansel and Gretel's evil stepmother dies, a kind woodsman kills the wolf

in “Little Red Riding Hood”), the happy ending in her tale can only come when the present is lived with recognition of the past. That said, it is not a great stretch to draw a parallel between MacDonald’s narrative intent here with her wider literary and ideological one: the voice of the present *must include* the voices of the past before it can be legitimate.

Intertext’s primary purpose is to bring readers into discourse with the story by including their own knowledge of the texts and myths and images of their culture in the construction of the story. Whether it be for a deeper understanding of the subversion of gender roles in *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* through the import of Shakespeare’s textual dialogue, or of James’ guilt about molesting his daughters through the Lady MacBeth image, or the “penance” in store for the Piper family evoked by the Ash Wednesday symbolism, intertext enriches readers’ experiences of MacDonald’s texts because it makes recourse to their own knowledge of the imported constructs. And, in addition to bringing a new and more personally relevant level to the events of her texts, MacDonald’s intertexts contribute to her dialogic project: that is, they ensure that her texts are informed by outside forces and that the readers’ own interpretations of events and passages play a role in the creation of meaning in the text. Intertext is thus both postmodern, in its self-reflexive awareness of the roles of author and reader in constructing

the story, and heteroglossic, since it brings other discourses into conversation with the text at hand. Through intertext, MacDonald is able to masterfully lead her readers to new levels of understanding and enjoyment of her texts, by drawing on their *own* cultural backgrounds in creating them.

Chapter Four:

MacDonald's Use of Humour

While Ann-Marie MacDonald's use of language and intertext is characteristic of her project to bring other voices into play in her work, her use of humour is fundamental to bringing the reader whole-heartedly into the text. Regina Barreca has explained that,

[f]or humor to work, there has to be a shared basis of particular experience — one of the reasons comedy doesn't seem as eternal as tragedy is because comedy often relies on getting a particular play with words or the overturning of a particular rule. (53)

Considered in these terms, humour is a natural complement to intertext for bringing voices into dialogue with one another. When humour invokes a reader's understanding of a certain situation and plays on it, the result is dialogic. This chapter will show how MacDonald uses humour as a means of opening her texts to dialogic exchange and of inviting her reader in. It will examine how, through humour, MacDonald makes it easy for her readers to feel more comfortable with subversive new concepts that challenge assumptions they may have held for a long time.

MacDonald has said that she employs comedy in her work because

. . . you can go into more dangerous territory, or more challenging territory for the general audience than with something that isn't comedy. (My comedy) challenges but invites people of diverse backgrounds and identities to an experience that they might be

prejudiced against at first. . . . And in the end they find themselves identifying with people who they thought were perverse or alien or deviant, and that's my crusade if I have one. (Dvorak 130)

Humour, for Ann-Marie MacDonald, is a means of making her readers comfortable with experiences that may be distant from their own, thus urging them to *include* those elements they might once have ignored. In *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, for example, when the changes in Constance's appearance cause significant and hilarious cases of mistaken identity, she uses humour to make homosexuality more acceptable to readers who might formerly have been alienated by it. MacDonald frames the homosexual attractions (of Desdemona, of Juliet, and of Romeo to Constantine) in terms of an honest misunderstanding, but then forces the situation so that, before her readers have the opportunity to feel alienated, they have identified with characters whose attractions they might normally consider problematic. It is specifically because MacDonald chooses slapstick humour to introduce this (possibly) alien concept that she ensures her reader won't be put off by it. Once the reader's complicity is garnered, she subverts the alienation itself by juxtaposing homosexual and heterosexual romance, showing that the "differences" that may once have alienated the reader are in fact few and meaningless.

Similarly, MacDonald uses humour in *Fall On Your Knees* to ease the reader into an acceptance of Frances. Seen objectively, Frances could be considered low-class, insubordinate, and trashy in the period in which she frequents the speakeasy and seduces Ginger Taylor. However, since her transgressions against common decency are so irreverently humorous — for example, the manual stimulation she gives a speak client while wearing a communion glove (293) — and because Frances has been such a humorous character from the outset, the reader is more inclined to sympathize with her plight and forgive the perverse behaviour. For MacDonald, humour is the ticket to acceptance.

Humour is, in fact, a pivotal strategy for many postmodern writers, in that it allows for both bold and subtle subversions of power structures. Subversion is a fundamental characteristic of postmodern writing; it forces readers to confront their own roles as consumers of the text and the text's own constructedness. Subversive parody, in particular, is helpful to feminist writers, who use it to explode pre-conceived notions of femininity. As Linda Hutcheon has argued, the

postmodern strategy of parodic use and abuse of mass-culture representations of women, subverting them by excess, irony, and fragmented recontextualization . . . work[s] to disrupt any passive consumption of such images. (PoP 152)

Feminist writers use humour to present new perspectives on women's realities by taking traditional literary forms, tools, and characters that have provided certain representations of women in the past, and turning them upside-down so as to question the assumptions at their foundations. Linda Hutcheon has said that feminist writers, in particular, use parody to "point to the history and historical power of those cultural representations, while ironically contextualizing both in such a way as to deconstruct them" (*PoP* 102). Marta Dvorak agrees, pointing out that feminist writers' textual structures present alternatives to traditionally masculine patterns, through clever manipulations of their storylines, language, themes, and forms:

What we tend to find is not only a woman-centered perspective, a view of male experience as peripheral, i.e. different and even deviant from the centre or norm, but also a whole set of narrative and dramatic strategies: complicity between teller and listener, tension between "the seen and the implied, between the manifest and the latent, between what is assumed and what is (Irvine 16)." (Dvorak 129)

Regina Barreca has noted that the material for women's humour is fundamentally different from men's humour. She notes in particular that the targets of women's parody and humorous subversion are often among the most powerful entities in their world. In discussing an argument advanced by critic Emily Toth, Barreca says that,

Toth notes that women rarely use the typical scapegoat figures in their humour. "Rather," she asserts, "women humorists attack —

or subvert — the deliberate choices people make: hypocrisies, affectations, mindless following of social expectations.” In contrast, women’s comedy takes as its material the powerful rather than the pitiful . . . [w]omen are more likely than men to make fun of those in high and seemingly invulnerable positions. (13)

Barreca’s observations perfectly describe MacDonald’s writing: she employs humorous subversion to take on oppressive powers, including the Catholic Church, and to re-work such canonical cornerstones as Shakespeare:

MacDonald continues . . . that “[p]oking fun at institutions is iconoclastic and girls are not supposed to be rebels. . . . I take something people identify with or revere, like Shakespeare, and say, ‘Excuse me, while I turn this upside down.’” (Hengen 103)

MacDonald has stated, however, that her literary project is not simply an assault on the power of such fundamental elements of modern culture. Rather, she aims to bring women’s and other marginalized voices into discourse with them:

I don’t want to bomb the Louvre. I’d like my picture in there, thank you very much. And I want to question what you’re hanging there. It’s about evolution as opposed to revolution. (MacDonald, interview with Lockhart, xvii)

In keeping with the reconstructionist project, she checks powers like the Catholic Church by illuminating them with other discourses, not by discounting their value or importance. Humour is a means of bringing marginalized voices into conversation with such power structures, and of

allowing them to play an active role in the way people with other perspectives perceive them.

MacDonald's primary textual comedic devices involve inversions of power and convention in which she subverts the "known", accepted norm to create new, multi-voiced personal discourses. Her texts are rife with imagery, themes, plotlines and conventions that sound familiar and yet somehow discordant notes for her reader, as she takes elements of traditional literature and turns them to her own purposes.

One might focus on MacDonald's parody of literature as an initial line of inquiry into her use of humour to subvert traditional forms and social hierarchies. A prime example is her re-positioning of the Gothic. In *The Arab's Mouth*, she presents a world of mystery as seen through the eyes of a female logician and scientist, Pearl Ramsay. MacDonald's parody of the Gothic style juxtaposes Pearl's rationality and the amorphous, mysterious atmosphere of nineteenth century Scotland:

PEARL: Whatever are you doing, roaming about the country in
                 that savage raiment?

VICTOR: Airing my privates, sister dear.   (13)

Whereas traditional Gothic novels are rife with characters (usually women) who roam the countryside because of mysteriously-precipitated madness, MacDonald's (male) character has a much more logical — and

humorous — motivation. Similarly, Aunt Flora fears Pearl's mysterious burn, which Pearl describes as "two concentric circles indicating an outward rippling of thermal energy" is "plainly the mark of a doughnut" (26), a reference to the mysterious circumstances of Grandfather MacPhail's death, and a parody of the Gothic's preference for supernatural events. MacDonald humorously juxtaposes the miraculous and the mundane, forcing the reader to re-consider the function of the Gothic.

E. F. Bleiler gives a quick summary of the traditional plotline of the Gothic in his introduction to *Three Gothic Novels*:

Almost all Gothic novels are motivated in the same way. At some time in the past a crime was committed but was not avenged. The criminal is usually a murderer and usurper. At the time the story takes place the true heir to the usurped estate lies hidden in another identity, unconscious of his destiny. It would seem that he is permanently swindled of his patrimony, and that murder will not out. But the criminal, or villain, persecutes the true heir, and through a chain of circumstances, which usually involve the supernatural, the ancient crime is detected, the villain is punished, and the heir receives his birthright. (xiv-xv)

The Gothic is therefore a form that is rooted in questioning what seems to be, offering answers that are alternative to the obvious. It is plain to see how such a form might be attractive to a writer like MacDonald, who seeks to unsettle many of her reader's pre-conceptions about characterization and "the truth". MacDonald mimics some of the

characteristics of the Gothic in *The Arab's Mouth*, which is set in an old stone house (reminiscent of a castle) in the Scottish countryside. The story contains events that some characters consider supernatural, and a secret, mad member of the Ramsay family, hidden away for years in the attic. In *Fall On Your Knees*, too, MacDonald uses Gothic flavour: the story features the haunting image of Materia wandering along the cliff, horrible dark secrets, questionable paternity, and extra-sensory communication, to name only a few examples. In MacDonald's version of the Gothic, however, some things are different: for instance, whereas Gothic novels traditionally dealt with establishing the proper ownership of family titles through the male lines, MacDonald introduces a feminist re-casting of the issue; women (Pearl, Lily) become the bearers of the family standard in years to come. Further, MacDonald's female characters are quite distant relatives of their traditional Gothic counterparts — whereas the heroines of Gothic novels tend to faint at the slightest excitement, MacDonald's heroines are women of steely resolve.

MacDonald's method of re-casting the Gothic is exemplary of the way that she subverts many other literary forms, urging the reader to think about the assumptions underlying them. When she presents situations that are reminiscent of the Gothic, she calls everything that "Gothic" means to her reader into play — an act that is both postmodern

and heteroglossic because it foregrounds the form and introduces other voices. When she takes that extra step in subverting the form, she shows her readers, through humour, that they must consciously recognize how that form marginalized certain voices. MacDonald's fundamental motivation in subverting the Gothic, a form built around the premise of searching for "an answer", is that the very *concept* of "one answer" needs to be subverted. Considered in this light, the Gothic is a deserving object of postmodern subversion.

Perhaps even more dramatically, MacDonald uses parody to subvert a cornerstone of the English canon, Shakespeare, in *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*. She re-examines the power structures of both Shakespeare's time and our own, using Shakespeare's tragedies *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* as the springboard. MacDonald uses comedy to juxtapose Constance's realities and ideas on gender roles with those of the characters in Shakespeare's plays, in a way that allows the reader to recognize and appreciate the difference. Moreover, she re-writes Shakespeare's tragedies to enact the liberation of women that she calls for in the present.

In MacDonald's play, Desdemona, no longer a victim, becomes a

warrior in her own right. MacDonald uses humour to frame Desdemona's reappearance in the play (during the pillow fight in Juliet's bedroom), when she is prepared to smother Constance for allegedly having had an affair with Othello:

[CONSTANCE, *her head still beneath the pillow, reaches under her shirt, yanks off the diamond necklace, and holds its broad golden clasp before DESDEMONA's eyes.*]
 DESDEMONA: Ah ha! [*reading inscription*] 'For gentle Desdemona, upon thy birthday, love Othello.'
 [CONSTANCE's *hands drop to the bed and go limp*] [*smiling*] Oh. It is my birthday today. I had forgot. [*to CONSTANCE*] I'm sorry. [*suddenly remembering*] Constance! [*whips the pillow up*] *Not dead? Not yet quite dead?* (80)

Desdemona's fury is sufficient that she is willing to commit murder — but the scene is so humorously presented that its parody is foregrounded. The reader is forced to re-consider Shakespeare's characterization of her, along with the assumptions about the character of women that were common in his time. Desdemona is no longer Shakespeare's powerless victim at the mercy of her husband's wrath: she is a strong woman, able and willing to control her own destiny. This is MacDonald's vision for Shakespeare's women: it is achieved through humour.

In a similar way, the author uses parodic humour when she re-

writes one of the canon's most enduring love stories. Realizing that Romeo favours Constantine over her, Juliet cross-dresses in an effort to win him back:

JULIET: *I know not how to tell thee who I am.
My sex, dear boy, is hateful to myself,
because it is belov'ed not by thee;
therefore I wear tonight, this boyish hose.*   (68)

Here, as discussed earlier, MacDonald's humour is irreverent, yet made palatable because of the sheer nerve it betrays. Because the scene is funny, the reader is able to be comfortable with a situation in which what is perhaps the most famous heterosexual couple in all of history is turned into a gay man and a cross-dressing woman.

It is important to recognize that the only reason these scenes *are* funny is that they play on the reader's knowledge of the original. MacDonald uses humour in re-working literary classics because she seeks to unsettle passive assumptions (like the way women were often characterized in Shakespeare's time) *without excluding* opposing points of view. Her aim is not to cast aspersions on the values of the society Shakespeare portrayed, but rather to underline their difference from the realities she calls for today; she ensures the success of her project by appealing to the reader's sense of humour. The trick is to avoid alienating her audience while making free with integral elements of its

cultural background. As she has articulated it in an interview, humour

[is] a way of inviting the reader in, and that's exactly about complicity. And once you've established that complicity, once you've welcomed the reader, then you can do all kinds of weird things! And then, you can be outrageous! (Lockhart xiv)

MacDonald is able to subvert important elements of her cultural background by using them to (sometimes outrageously) inform her fresh perspectives. This writing is truly dialogic, as it draws on the existence and knowledge of the original text to bring meaning to her new one. Certainly, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* can be an entertaining play for an audience that is unfamiliar with Shakespeare. But for the subversive messages to be effective, the play must parody a known construct. Thus, MacDonald's humour does indeed draw on the "shared basis of human experience" that Barreca describes (53) — and, because of that, it is heteroglossic: it has recourse to her own voice, to Shakespeare's, and to the reader's perception of the difference between the two.

MacDonald similarly subverts gender roles in *The Arab's Mouth*, when Dr. Reid gives a speech that is both relevant to the thinking of his day, and egregious to the point of hilarity in the reader's modern context:

Dear, dear Flora . . . We must face up to the truth: Pearl is a woman, womb-driven and drained periodically of vital blood which rushes from her brain to her loins, framed by nature for one

purpose alone. . . . For all the while she was just a woman. Just a woman with a woman's brain, soft and nestled within its stunted brain case — intuitive, perceptive, and wonderfully imitative . . . like that of the higher primates, like that of the lower races. (49-50)

MacDonald parodies the way late nineteenth-century scientific discourse constructed women (and “other” races). Dr. Reid asserts that, regardless of her seeming rationality and scientific mind, Pearl is simply a good imitator of the intelligence of the males around her (like her father), and was created for the sole purpose of reproduction. Though this evaluation of the role and capacities of women was not uncommon at the time in which the play is set, it is beyond reason for MacDonald's modern reader, and therefore humorous. That said, though, the reader is also acutely aware that there remain people today who share Dr. Reid's opinion — and MacDonald's play brings *their* beliefs into question. In sum, her parodies serve to show how today's “modern” society is in some ways not unlike the society of the less enlightened past, and, by showing how ridiculous the beliefs sound when stated plainly, urge her readers to continue to work against them.

In *Fall On Your Knees*, Frances' sarcastic consideration of the various ways in which pregnant women's experiences are represented underlines MacDonald's critique of narrative traditions that portray

women's realities at whim:

It's hard to know what to believe about pregnancy when, in movies, miscarriages are a narrative convenience as close as the nearest flight of stairs, while in books like *Great Pioneer Women* the broads all fight bears and harvest corn right up to their accouchement. (398)

This example effectively urges a consideration of how women are portrayed in literature as both weak and powerful, exposing the subjectivity of their representations. Frances notes that women's portrayals in fiction are molded to fit the story. This point, illustrated humorously, sends the powerful message that representations of women in fiction are often false.

The subjects of MacDonald's subversion are not uniquely based on perceptions of the role of women: perhaps one of the institutions she parodies with the most fervor and passion is Catholicism, because of its tendency to silence *many* voices, including those of women. A self-described "recovering Catholic" (Wyman D4), she finds the teachings and dogma of the religion both beautiful and infuriating — and well-deserving of her subversive parody:

Now, the Catholic Church is extremely powerful. People who aren't Catholic know that it's a powerful thing. It's also extremely dramatic, extremely theatrical. . . . There's a great deal that is beautiful and terrifying, and it's very narrative. Of course it also keeps you subservient to the Vatican, which just raises the hairs on my head. (MacDonald, interview with Lockhart, ix-x)

MacDonald's texts show ample evidence of her resentment of the oppression propagated by the Catholic Church. She uses comic parody to question some of the Church's teachings and practices in *Fall On Your Knees* — a novel whose very title evokes the Christmas hymn "O Holy Night" — and underlines the inhumanity of certain Catholic teachings in the era in which it is set. She faults the Catholic Church for hypocrisy, for allowing people like

. . . Mercedes to stray so far into the sin of pride under the guise of humility. There's so much of [Catholicism] that I treasure, that I cherish, but like any big institution, the top-down stuff is going to be horrible. (MacDonald, interview with Lockhart, x)

For the reader acquainted (and especially for the reader disillusioned) with the teachings and dogma of the Catholic Church, MacDonald's humorous jibes serve as very effective interrogation, without being entirely antagonistic. She lampoons very serious Church symbolism by using it as a starting point for the Piper girls' imaginations:

Even though the Little Women in the book were Protestant, "Let's say they're really Catholic, okay?" and Frances and Mercedes would do extreme unction on Beth in her death-bed and apply a holy relic to her burning forehead, let's say it's a piece of the Shroud of Turin, ok? No, let's say it's Saint Anthony's tongue. (199)

Then, in a hilariously irreverent textual parody, the girls play "Little Women Doing the Stations of the Cross".

Lily got to be Beth being Veronica wiping the face of Jesus with a cloth and the picture of his face goes perfectly onto her cloth as a gift for her kindness. Mercedes got to be Meg being Simon of Cyrene who helps Jesus carry the Cross, and Frances wanted to be Jo being Jesus but Mercedes said that would be blasphemous so Frances got to be the Good Thief hanging next to Jesus. That is, she got to be Jo being the Good Thief. (200)

Though her parody does take away from the awe surrounding some key elements of the Church's mystique (and, therefore, its power), it does so gently, without implying that the Stations of the Cross are meaningless. The result is a subtle urging to consider the Church's symbols objectively, as symbols — and not dogmatically fixed truths.

The author's subversion of the power of the Catholic Church is necessarily more sarcastic when it attacks not just its symbolism but the rules that it enforces without allowing for question. In her description of the Church's teachings on birth control, MacDonald ironically paraphrases *The Catholic Wife*:

Rhythm is a sin, of course, but only a venial one and sanctioned by the Holy Father in Rome, provided you are without lust when performing the generative act and not hoping not to get pregnant. (Unless you are performing the generative act in order to ward off your husband's lust for another woman, in which case it is a sin for you to give into his lust, but one mitigated by your intention of preventing him from committing a worse sin with a woman not his wife. Go to confession, you're fine.) (FOYK 352)

Here, MacDonald uses wry humour to foreground and question the hypocrisy of Catholic teaching on birth control when examined literally.

Elsewhere, she resorts to darkly sarcastic humour to question the Church's obsessive concern with capturing young souls and indoctrinating them with dogma. When Mercedes finally visits Anthony at the Nova Scotia Home for Coloured Children, after having lied to Frances and told her that her son is dead, and after having relegated her nephew to an orphanage in the name of safeguarding her family's reputation, her sole concern as a good Catholic is to ensure that Anthony has been properly taught the rote Catholic catechism:

Mercedes waits till he looks up. Then she begins: "Who made the world?"

He hesitates, parts his lips, then, "God made the world."

"Who is God?"

"God is the creator of heaven and earth and of all things."

"What is man?"

"Man is a creature composed of body and soul and made to the image and likeness of God." (546)

Satisfied that Anthony is able to recite the catechism, Mercedes feels that her responsibilities to him, to her sister, to her family's reputation and to God have been met. Sarcasm, in this case, as in many in *Fall On Your Knees*, interrogates the values underlying the Church's teachings.

Mercedes has no guilt about the deceit she has shown nor the sorrow and hardship she has caused both Frances and Anthony, since all is fine as long as Anthony is another soul the Catholic Church can tally among its faithful. MacDonald's use of humour urges her reader to give such unquestioning beliefs some critical consideration, and to recognize the

silencing propensities of a religion that indoctrinates unthinking obedience.

MacDonald also uses humour effectively to unsettle conventional approaches to recorded history: Kathleen states that pigeons “perform a valuable civic service by keeping the glorious past in perspective” (465). Though this is an offhand reference, its importance shouldn’t be underestimated. MacDonald has anchored her story with characters who, though not considered important by official recorded “History” (little girls, coal miners, Blacks, Arabs, Jews), are central to her narrative and are therefore vitally important to the reader. Having followed MacDonald through the novel and having become attached to these characters whom History often ignores, the reader realizes that official History leaves many important voices out. Kathleen’s sarcastic quip, appreciated at first for its irreverent humour, infiltrates the reader’s consciousness and brings MacDonald’s message home: that one voice of official History is not enough. Humour is, therefore, for MacDonald, a means of bringing those “untouchable” seats of power, like the English canon, the Catholic Church, History, and the patriarchy down to the level where many voices (those of the texts from which she borrows *and* those of her readers) can contribute to their re-evaluation and re-positioning within a more inclusive modern context.

Carnival laughter, which re-evaluates conventional perceptions of reality, is particularly important to the reconstructionist project. Nancy Glazener's discussion of Bakhtin's theory of carnival laughter suggests that it

challenges traditional conventions of logic and identity. It is ambivalent in that it affirms and denies at once. . . . In addition to its oral genres, which are characterized by hyperbolic praise and abuse, its principal manifestation is the masquerade, in which masks destabilize identity in general and masked surrogates for high figures are ritually degraded and deprived of their official identities. Bakhtin proposes that these sexual or scatological humiliations defy officialdom's pretenses to personal power and reassert the power of the metaphorical body of the people, the life cycle that transcends the individual. (113)

Though MacDonald's project may be more subtle in its subversion of "traditional conventions" than the masquerade in New Orleans at Mardi Gras, Glazener's description of carnival laughter can be applied to her work. In *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, when Desdemona grabs Constance's skirt as she is pulled through the time warp, Constance enters the world of *Romeo and Juliet* wearing her top and leggings — the conventional dress of a young man in that period. This causes Juliet to think Constance is a man, and wreaks havoc with Shakespeare's romance when Juliet falls for the masquerading Constantine instead of Romeo. (This subversion is pushed even further when Romeo falls in love with the new young man.) *Fall On Your Knees*

also employs a cross-sexual masquerade when Rose dresses as a man so that she and Kathleen can go out to the jazz clubs together in New York: “She is a tall slim young man in a curious suit of black and tan” (515).

MacDonald’s use of carnival laughter and inversion effectively questions the power structures inherent in gender roles and identity, and estranges naturalized assumptions about gender roles as “clothed” in a patriarchal sign system. A lesbian writer with aims to legitimize and make a space in literature for women who want to live and relate to one another on their own terms, MacDonald uses carnival inversion to present the absurdity of a couple having to resort to disguise in order to be together in public.

MacDonald’s works fit comfortably within a genre Shannon Hengen has identified as feminist comedy. Hengen says that such writing exhibits

endings [which] overturn established generic conventions, such as the preference for birth as closure (240). Carlson writes: “plays that conclude with groups of women usually drop both men and marriage from their definitions of happiness” (238). Other common elements among women’s comedies are ‘disregard for stage realism’ (205), casting against gender and number, intrusive musical interludes, and women’s cabaret/laughter (213-244).” (100-101)

Certainly, writing by men exhibits many of these same strategies.

However, they are employed more frequently in feminist comedy because of their particular value in advancing feminist ideological aims. When a Ghost appears to Constance wearing her toque and spouting cheesy

punchlines (*GDGJ* 73), the disruption of stage realism self-reflexively foregrounds the construction of the play. Each time the audience is urged to recognize the constructedness of the play, it must also accept the fact that the characterizations (including gender roles) are constructed and rooted in the ideologies and cultural relativities that the author's own personal background and belief systems bring. *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* features the play between Constance and Constantine; gender roles are blurred when one character is accepted as both a man and a woman. This gender reversal is augmented by the cross-dressing of other characters: when Romeo appears in drag, calling himself "Romiet" (72) in an effort to win Constantine's heart, Constance's gender reversal is brought full circle. We now have representations of two women, Romiet and Juliet, and one man, Constantine. MacDonald's subversivity in these examples, though novel in their parody, is not without foundation: it plays on the realities of stage productions in Shakespeare's day, in which boys were cast in the roles of women. Finally, *The Arab's Mouth*, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, and *Fall On Your Knees* all feature conclusions without men or marriage, since they focus primarily on women's realities in a world where they are central, rather than in the position of satellites to men's lives.

MacDonald's use of punning and humour open up new avenues of meaning for her reader. She uses words as comedic devices by drawing on their sounds to introduce a new dimension of humour. Words are more than signifiers for MacDonald: they are *things* that can be used to achieve humour on many levels. In *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, she uses the confusion that arises from the possible multiple meanings of some word sounds to pose the fundamental question of the play:

CONSTANCE:	Do you know something of the Manuscript?	
	Do you know who the Author is?	
GHOST:		A lass.
CONSTANCE:	I know, 'alas, alas poor Yorick', so?!	
	Who wrote this thing?	
GHOST:		A beardless bard.
CONSTANCE:		A boy?
GHOST:	A lass! (73-74)	

This exchange parodies the literary convention of the hero visiting a seer or a sibyl for answers that are often delivered in the form of a riddle. Even more meaningfully, MacDonald uses this punning to convey the fundamental message of her play: that Constance is both the Author of the play and the author of her own reading. This example playfully urges the audience to realize the truth: that Constance has been written, and has allowed herself to be inscribed, by a patriarchal metanarrative, and

that she is freed when she becomes author of her own destiny and “writes” her own ticket out. This “truth” is right in front of Constance, but is sometimes blurred by linguistic misunderstanding; it is only when she considers the Ghost’s words from a new perspective that she can understand. This is the lesson to be taken from the text: true discourse is only produced when new perspectives are brought into play.

Ann-Marie MacDonald’s humour invites her readers’ willing participation in the construction of the story by making the world of the text a comfortable intellectual space where their own cultural and literary backgrounds contribute to the production of meaning. MacDonald knows that, if her project to “make the world larger” is to succeed, she must find a way to persuade her readers to re-think oppressive constructs that are very real in their lives, without alienating them; for her, humour is the answer. Humour allows MacDonald’s readers to be comfortable and feel unthreatened within a narrative that will quite pointedly unsettle conventional and unfair assumptions they may have held — like, for example, heterosexuality being “normal” and homosexuality being “abnormal”. Further, because of the complicity that comes with humour, the author uses it to parody traditional literary forms like the Gothic to expose the sexist ideologies that underlie them, and to allow the reader to appreciate the difference between the accepted

ideologies of their time and the reader's present day. MacDonald uses humour to subvert seats of power like mainstream History and the Catholic Church, so as to underline their respective propensities for silencing certain racial, social and gender groups, and to encourage an objective evaluation of the lessons they teach.

It is apparent that MacDonald uses humour as a means of introducing and exploring issues, like oppression, that are not to be taken lightly. However, it is only because the author chooses humour, which makes recourse to the reader's own experience and knowledge for effect, that she is able to subvert some of her society's most highly-revered institutions without alienating an audience that was raised in an environment steeped in them. It is because of the dialogic relationships between the original constructs, MacDonald's subversions, and the reader's consciousness, drawn upon by humour, that her project succeeds.

Conclusion

Ann-Marie MacDonald's readers find themselves at the centre of a whirlwind of stories, ideas, and voices. Though her texts are complicated and busy, they are not alienatingly so: rather, they are rich with imagery and resonances that speak to different readers' experiences, and are strategically chosen to make all feel welcome. It is because of her effort to ensure all those voices are represented and made central that MacDonald's work has received such wide acclaim and such respect from readers. All readers of her work find something in it that's true to their experience, and makes them want to read on.

This wide-ranging appeal to readers of numerous backgrounds and cultures and political positions is the very goal of MacDonald's work. While they don't follow established patterns of literary production, her texts do borrow from many styles and genres to build a mosaic from all their own: in the end, her writing is made up of cultural, literary and social experiences shared by many, infused with the new voices her readers bring. It is vitally important to MacDonald that her readers feel comfortable in her texts; to ensure that comfort level, she contextualizes her narratives in cultural elements they might know. To MacDonald, this focus on the reader's sense of belonging within the text is fundamentally

important since, once readers are comfortable within the form of the text, they are more open to the new ideas and directions it might take. As she has expressed it in an interview,

I want to give the reader something completely original, completely new, and yet strangely familiar at the same time. I want to reassure them. It's like taking them to the moon in a station wagon [laughter]. You know what I mean? It's okay, it's just an old wood-paneled station wagon, but you'd never believe where we're going! (Lockhart xiv)

MacDonald's reader is treated to an exciting (and sometimes frightening) "station wagon" ride through a myriad of traditional metanarratives, looking through windows in directions that provide for entirely new perspectives.

MacDonald's work is inarguably postmodern because it seeks to find *and empower* the voices of those new points of view. The author doesn't allow the reader to play the role of passive consumer — rather, readers are forced to confront their own role in the construction of her stories and the voices of the characters they read. MacDonald uses many of the tools of the postmodern text to undermine traditional concepts of authority in her texts, from subversion of institutions like the Catholic Church to re-readings of Shakespeare. Her texts are blatantly self-reflexive, constantly reminding her readers that they are constructed by a politically- and ideologically-infused writer — and urging the

recognition that, by extension, *all* texts are. Inasmuch as MacDonald's writing particularly seeks to undermine the unquestioned authority of the patriarchy, it is also feminist. Feminism and postmodernism share a fundamental drive to interrogate the authority of any single voice (in feminism, of course, the voice of the patriarchy) both in literature and in society. Naturally, MacDonald uses the tools of postmodernism to advance particularly feminist ideals, and to introduce new means of perceiving gender equality for her readers.

MacDonald's work also reflects the reconstructionist theory that texts must make recourse to many different voices, *including* that of the reader, to communicate real meaning. Postmodernism and feminism posit the need to consider the voices of groups traditionally relegated to the margins — for some writers, this is done by unseating the authority of dominant voices. Here, however, is where the reconstructionist side of MacDonald's project differentiates her work from others.

Reconstructionism holds that without the voices of *all* groups co-existing in a society, there is no real discourse — and, rather than interrogating dominant authority figures so as to unseat them, MacDonald brings the voices of marginalized groups into discourse *with* them. It is logical that an *oeuvre* like MacDonald's would present the merging point of postmodernism, feminism, and reconstructionism: her writing challenges

the authority of a dominant group by ensuring that the voices of traditionally marginalized characters are given equal weight. Together, the voices of all members of the worlds of her texts make up true discourse.

MacDonald uses language, and the ways languages include and exclude characters, as one of her primary tools in the creation of an inclusive, multi-vocal text. Her use of language helps define characters for the reader, since accents and vocabulary form a major part of their personae and establish their social standing, to a degree, in the reader's mind. By extension, MacDonald also uses language to help characters define themselves within her fictions, because they make assumptions about one another based on their uses of language. Some of MacDonald's characters use exclusive languages to keep others out of their inner worlds, while others use different languages to invite one another into their personal realms. Throughout MacDonald's major works, language plays a multi-faceted and important role in establishing the differences (and the value in the differences) between voices. In addition to multiple oral languages, MacDonald introduces non-verbal systems of communication, like music, to augment the communications her characters share. Verbal languages, non-verbal forms of communication like Hector's silent system of signs, and music work

together to open discourse both between characters and between the author and her readers. Language is a major player in her work, as it is not only reflective, but *constitutive*, of meaning.

Ann-Marie MacDonald uses intertext to bring her reader into active dialogue with her texts. She invokes the realities and contexts of “other” groups by bringing elements of other literary and social products into her texts, and playing the resonances of the two off one another to create new meanings. In true reconstructionist form, MacDonald shows how it is the *intersection* of different voices that constitutes real discourse as she celebrates the layering of voice upon voice. Further, since intertext relies on the reader’s knowledge of the text or image or style imported into her writing, it necessarily brings the reader’s interpretation of the interplay between the two texts to bear on the creation of “meaning” in the scene. This, in turn, encourages her readers’ continued participation in the text, since their own experiences have contributed to it: now, through intertext, the text is personal. The reader’s active role in the making of meaning is fundamental to MacDonald’s postmodern, reconstructionist project, because it necessarily implies a heteroglossic, multi-centred text.

MacDonald invests many textual situations with humour, with twofold results: first, since humour makes recourse to her readers’

experiences and backgrounds, her readers are allowed a comfortable feeling of familiarity within her texts, and do not feel alienated in textual moments where elements of their own backgrounds might come under subversive scrutiny. Then, once she has the reader's confidence and complicity, MacDonald uses humour to subvert and overturn social and literary conventions and traditions that silence marginalized voices. Humour opens MacDonald's texts to dialogic voices, while at the same time subverting conventions those voices might previously have accepted without question. This is the essence of MacDonald's postmodern, reconstructionist project.

MacDonald's literary work is predicated on a need to open up the public, mainstream discourse to include the voices of groups which, because of gender, age, race, culture, or social standing, have previously been marginalized. Her work attacks traditional seats of authority, gently and sometimes not so gently — but always with a desire to enlarge them with the addition of new voices, rather than to replace them. Her emphases on multi-vocality, eclecticism, and multilingualism embody the fundamental goal of her work: Ann-Marie MacDonald seeks to create a literature that speaks *to* many, but *for* none. Her work invites an endless stream of new readers to come and add their voices to the chorus — to create, together, genuine texts of inclusion.

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APPENDIX: "Taking them to the moon in a station wagon": an interview with Ann-Marie MacDonald

By telephone, 11 May 1998

Melanie Lee Lockhart: I've heard you characterize your project as the "fight to make the world larger". Could you touch on the strategies you use to appeal to a wider audience, how you bring other points of view into the body of your work?

Ann-Marie MacDonald: I don't try to create an ideal world. I don't try to fix the world, in my novel for example. I try to include as much of what I see being there as possible, and enter into sympathy with the various points of view. For example, entering into sympathy with James and his destructive desires and ambitions. Entering into sympathy with Teresa and her rage and her racism and her pride — she has stuff in common with James at that level. And we can definitely say, well, she has reason and he doesn't — we could argue that. But I try not to apologize or to justify points of view, but to illuminate them.

I'm not trying to change the characters, to change James into somebody who won't abuse his daughter. I'm not trying to change Teresa — I mean, she shoots somebody. I'm not trying to make anyone better or worse than they really are. But try to see that their actions will have results and repercussions. And somewhere, symphonically, each of them is playing an instrument. And they have no idea that they are playing in the same orchestra. They have no idea that they're all — and I guess this is my vision as a storyteller — that, wittingly or unwittingly, they are all contributing to the narrative, and to the various explosions of the narrative. For example, Frances being shot is a process that began when her older sister met Rose in New York City. It continued when Frances started to try to seduce Ginger. It was compounded when Ginger heard Rose play the piano in Harlem when Rose was masquerading as a man. All the steps are there.

Basically, the Luvovitzes and the Taylors and Teresa, the black people, the Jewish people, the Lebanese people, the white people, you know, the Anglo people, many of them share the same prejudices and the very same self-images. And I like to show that, because it's ironic. And many of their clannish qualities are very endearing, and many of us can identify with them, but it's also necessary that they be put up against pluralism and democracy and individuality, and the right of people to be individuals, not just products of their culture, or of the old country. And

it's in that collision, the tension between the old country, the family, the racial, cultural, clannish values, colliding with the contemporary world in a way that the secular world, the world that says you're an individual no matter what colour you are, it doesn't matter. And the irony is of course it matters, not just because you'll be discriminated against, but because that gives you power too! It gives you identity. It does matter.

But it's in that tension and it's in that collision that I find the stories. Not wanting to lose what you've been born with, what your parents have given you, but knowing that you have to lose some of it in order to embrace what's going to be yours. And to be part of a secular, democratic culture, you move out of that inner ring — but you try to keep both things going.

MLL: Would you say that that's what your writing is for — to bring these various experiences and discourses into communication with one another?

AMM: Well, I don't set out with a mission, you know? But it seems to me there's a lot of drama there, there's a lot of pain and a lot of effort and a lot of very, very good intentions and a lot of anger. People are always terrified of losing something, terrified of change. But in my book, for example, it's like various strains are longing to embrace one another. There are two families that are longing to become one. There's a child that needs to be born. James' white whiteness and Materia's sort of "in-between world", and Ginger and Rose — it's almost like they're magnets. You can't keep people apart. People want to find one another. They want to embrace difference. But they don't want to lose their individuality, either.

MLL: In talking about "difference", I'd like to ask you about your use of languages. You've brought at least seven different languages into play in *Fall On Your Knees*.

AMM: I did? Wow.

MLL: I'm interested to know why you would have chosen to bring all of these varied languages into the novel.

AMM: I feel language is a very, very tender relationship — the relationship with a mother tongue. Or a language that is being lost to you, a language that belonged to your parents. Or a language that only belongs at home, you know? They are repositories, emotional

repositories, repositories of history. If you grow up speaking one language at home and another on the outside world, you'll have a whole range of friends and important people and you might marry or partner with somebody who speaks English or whatever, but there will be places in your heart and mind that are only accessed via the first language, the old language, the emotional language, the childhood language. And I find the love of language very moving, and the idea that so often immigrants who come here and work really really hard, they don't have a romantic or "progressive" attitude to their own language. All they care about is that their kids speak English. Quite often it's the next generation that mourns the loss of the language.

MLL: You have some wonderful passages in the novel in which Mahmoud talks about the way English is foreign to him, so cold on his tongue, and James the same with Gaelic.

AMM: Yeah, and of course, I feel the same way about English. But I also know that it's the necessary language for so many people who come here. I imagine what it must be like to learn it, I imagine how harsh it must be, how cold. I imagine the warmth of those other languages, being like the coat you came over with, you know? These are my possessions and now one by one they've gone and I've replaced them with the shiny new North American things along with English. And now my kids speak English and have a bare knowledge of the original language. Language is a very intimate thing. It's like a loved one. And it's the poignancy of losing it and replacing it with another one. I find it very moving.

And I also think it's to do with secret codes, as well, I mean, the little girls are closer to their mother as long as they're speaking Arabic. And if they don't have enough Arabic, they'll invent it. Invent a secret language that helps keep their bond alive, their connection to their mother.

MLL: It's interesting to see, too, how language is an agent of exclusion in your novel, as well as being an agent of inclusion.

AMM: Yes, because it's very intimate. When people want to be intimate with one another, they speak their first language, they speak the language of intimacy. Like the Luvovitzes, they speak Yiddish, and then there's Arabic . . .

MLL: Did you have any concerns about the reader feeling excluded when reading all the other languages in your novel?

AMM: No, none, because I'm not interested in mystifying or stumping anybody. Any time I've used a word or a phrase in another language I've translated it either literally or implicitly. I've implied what the phrase must mean by the way in which it is responded to by the next character. It's very important to me that I don't send readers off to dictionaries too often — at least, foreign language dictionaries! So I try to allow the reader the experience of the intimacy of the mother tongue as well, by allowing them to understand what must have been said just now. I don't want them not to understand. I want them to take it for granted that the language changed, and that they got it, because three lines later, all was revealed. And that they were a part of it. It wasn't a language from another country that was being spoken in a kind of restaurant that you'd never dare drop into, or in a home, or at a baptism in another culture. It actually allows us to go into those places that are sealed off.

MLL: It helps your readers not to feel as though they are the isolated ones.

AMM: Yeah, they're not the outsider. Everybody gets to go inside the kitchen, inside the church, the synagogue, the whatever, and to find out that so many of these things are about the same thing. And they're not identical. I'm not one of these relativists who say "Oh, it's all the same". It isn't all the same. But I think that we can enter into sympathy with so much. And entering into sympathy is not the same as not judging. I mean, for example, James is wrong. You can enter into sympathy with someone and also say they're wrong. And that is the greatest challenge, and that's the strong thing to do. Because in the sort of "pop-psychology" world that we've just lived through, and I think it's changing now, there's this false idea that you don't judge. Well, I think you do judge. But you don't dismiss and do a knee-jerk thing. The question I often get is about James — people admit in a kind of mystified way that they kind of cared for him. That they couldn't hate him. And that's the whole point. If it's easy to hate something, it's very easy to see the evil coming at you — the wrong thing or the bad thing. But people don't see it. It's much more complicated than that.

MLL: You've set James up in such a way, though, that your reader is inclined to sympathize with him — because he is introduced in such a sympathetic way.

AMM: Yes. Absolutely.

MLL: So it's not difficult, really, to sympathize with James. It's not as though he's a purely evil character.

AMM: No. I wanted the reader to feel so sad that he fucks up so badly. I wanted it to be terribly sad. Because so often we make things black and white — “Oh, the aggressor is the evil one”, and it doesn’t really do people much good to deny the complexity of evil. Especially since most crimes of that nature are committed by people who love other people.

MLL: Even within the worlds of your characters who are all speaking one language, you do a lot of interesting things — especially with English. I’m thinking now specifically of your plays. In *The Arab’s Mouth* you have Pearl, who speaks a language that often sounds like you and I would speak in Canada in 1998, and then sometimes when she’s really angry, this very heavily-accented brogue. Is there a statement there about the nature of language?

AMM: [laughs] Yes, well, when she’s being rational and progressive and a new woman, she sounds contemporary. But when she’s really motivated emotionally, she reverts, the way we often do, to our true colours. To something much older, and more culturally based, more tribal. And she hasn’t put the two together, that’s part of her problem. She’s got a handle on the progressive sciences and the new woman, and the shrinking globe and all of that, and she’s very anti-superstition, anti-irrational, but because she dismisses her emotional life and her intuition so completely, they sort of reach up behind and bite her. And that’s why she breaks out in the brogue, and that’s why she reverts. She hasn’t brought the two things together. The right hand and the left haven’t shaken hands, which is why they’re wounded — all these wounds running through my work, [laughs] it’s all various forms of stigmata!

MLL: Yeah, there’s Catholic imagery running through all of your work, which is rewarding for someone like me, whom I’ve heard you call “recovering Catholic”. . .

AMM: [laughter] Yes, yes, yes!

MLL: . . . kind of like frequent-flyer points when you can say “Hey! I get it!”

AMM: [laughter] Yeah, and you know that not everyone’s getting it.

MLL: Now, in what you’ve just said about the way that Pearl reverts to this language that comes out when she gets upset and when her real feelings come out... In *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* you

have Constance suddenly able to speak in iambic pentameter. Is that the same thing?

AMM: I think it's a precursor of what we're talking about, of literally changing languages. It literally is a language change, isn't it, it's a stylistic change. The way we speak the language, and the language we speak, is part of our identity. I'm a different person when I speak French. I'm a different person when I speak German. It might be subtle, it might be tonal, it might be sort of like a bit of a flavor difference in a wine or something, and the essential "I" is not different — but it's different. Something changes. These languages are all located in different places in our brains and tissues. Our tongue does different things, our face moves in a different way, it makes us say different things. It makes us think differently. And that's why I feel there's a very organic, a very sensual relationship with language. Language is like a lover, or a mother, or a friend. Or the most intimate garment. You change when you speak it. It's not a form of math, a form of driver of communication. It's living, and it is full of the inconsistencies and warts and bumps and beauty and irrationality that human beings are. I mean, languages are so human. Because more languages exist in their exceptions to grammatical rules than they do in their rules. So to speak a language is to allow the language and the memory of all the people who ever created the language or who keep it alive. It's to channel a whole culture, to allow yourself to be shaped, however subtly. Language is a personality, a character, in my book. So when she speaks in iambic pentameter she's entering into the culture, and it grants her permission in many ways. I guess it's sort of like the magical thing of language.

MLL: And when you say it grants her permission, she's shocked by that.

AMM: Look at what I can do! I'm flying! I'm flying! And then there's all the gift of tongues thing, too, right? That always fascinated me as a kid, "and suddenly they could speak all the languages of the world . . ." — I couldn't think of anything better, really! Imagine if you could do that. It would be even better than being able to talk to the animals. Then again, maybe you could do that too!

MLL: *[laughter]* You also have a love of music that plays a large role, and that does the same things that verbal languages do in your work. You've got music in terms of its silencing propensities, in what James' father does and then he does in turn, and then also as an instrument of expression, especially in *Materia* and in *Rose* — do you see music as another language again?

AMM: Absolutely. And it's a channel with a forbidden . . . You know, the Catholic Church thought that anything written in a minor key was evil. Music is often seen to be a conductor of the soul, of good and evil, we get closer to the gods with it, you're either closer to the music of the Spirit, or perhaps the opposite, you're conjuring up the lower elements.

MLL: And you've done a lot to set up that relationship, too. One of my favourite juxtapositions in *Fall On Your Knees* is that Sweet Jessie Hogan versus the Apostle's Creed thing. You've done that in a number of places in the novel.

AMM: Well, that's true, and the idea that music is religious somewhere. Opera traditionally demands the sacrifice of the female singer, the soprano, right? And it's interesting that the last castrato sang in the Vatican in . . . maybe it was 1913. But the idea of the voice being the soul, of music being sacramental somehow, and also forbidden. It's very, very powerful. So when Frances plays those trashy tunes it's a major rebellion.

MLL: And rips the rolls out of the player piano.

AMM: Yeah, and when Mercedes sits down to play, it's the music of denial. It's the music of "let's smooth everything over". When Materia plays it really unnerves James, because it's her own homemade, incipient jazz, it's bad stuff, it's the whole empire, it's our entire way of life starting to unravel in ragtime.

MLL: And it mirrors her verbal language, too . . .

AMM: Yeah. You know, when I was writing this book, I conceived of it as a musical. Once I knew it was a novel, I said to myself "it's a musical, don't ever forget that". It's music. Not just because I use music in it, but because the whole thing should be and is musical. And I wrote it in three movements, and there are leitmotifs that recur, and it's symphonic in a sense, but also it's musical in the sense of language. I read it aloud, you know, I never was satisfied with anything until I'd read it aloud. Because it has to work rhythmically. And I think that's it, really, there's a sense of the plot and the characters progressing along with the music of the century. Parlor tunes and opera and jazz and ragtime.

MLL: The pieces that you have chosen also inform the story to a large degree.

AMM: Yeah — you could just look at the music that is described and talked about and mentioned and if you only extracted that you would also have a story. That was my intention. But also to give a sense of the ebb and flow of a symphony, the sense that you keep hearing that theme over and over again, and it's developed, and there are spin-offs, so that no matter how far you stray from the central narrative, you know you're coming back.

MLL: In bringing music into the story, you've created a system in which your reader participates with a number of senses. You tell the reader what she sees and what she hears, but with the musical references you're also conjuring it.

AMM: That was very much my aim, my mission. That was the biggest challenge that I set for myself, was "can I describe music? Can I make somebody hear it with their skin, with their flesh? Can I give them the experience of this music without them actually hearing it?" And how does language do that? How can language become music? And that's what I mean when I say that I thought of this book as a musical. That the language would become the music, that one medium could become another. Oh my God, that's like the transubstantiation, right? *[laughter]*

MLL: Oh no! *[laughter]*

AMM: *[Laughing]* I can run, but I can't hide! Hahaha, but that's really what it is. And also that shape shifting too, right, transformation. You pour this from this vessel into this vessel.

MLL: Now, you've done the same thing with other texts as well. Certainly the texts of Catholicism, as well as references to the Bobbsey Twins, and *Little Women*, there are a lot of passages that come to play in your texts that originate in other texts. What effect do you want those intertexts to have on your readers?

AMM: I want them to have the cumulative effect of feeling as though they exist in a very layered world, full of references that could be theirs. And even if they weren't theirs, somehow they will enter into that strong memory that the characters have, that those references will *become* their references. Because every reader will have their reference points, but they won't necessarily be the ones that are invoked in the book. But if I invoke the ones that I use in the book in the right way, the reader will substitute their own. And there will be a sense of reminiscent richness.

And that will build and build until there's this fantastic fog, a thick pea soup of experience and memory that the reader takes on as though it were their own freight of personal memory.

MLL: And for the reader who does pick up on them, the experience is heightened because every time you make mention of one of them, the entire world that comes with that reference comes to your story as well.

AMM: Yes. It's like just sounding a note, and implying that other piece of music. Maybe you know that piece of music, or maybe you know one like it. The image that really comes to mind is like this rich, lined uterine bed that's just waiting to be fertilized, or soil, that builds up layer upon layer and becomes fertile.

MLL: Why do you choose institutions like the Catholic Church and Shakespeare to be the main texts that you use to . . .

AMM: At the personal level, they exerted such an influence over my own life as a Catholic, right? But then, you know, I've grown up and I've gone through my first howl of rage and rejection and reassessment etcetera, and then I realize in fact that it has a place in the world that is larger than myself, that I can bring my personal experiences to bear on the stuff that I have learned as a grown-up via research, and situating all of this in a larger world. So for me, it's always about taking the raw materials of my experience and learning so much more about it, and contextualizing it, and enlarging it.

Now, the Catholic Church is extremely powerful. People who aren't Catholic know that it's a powerful thing. It's also extremely dramatic, extremely theatrical, and I think that had something to do with why I went into theatre into the first place. There's a great deal that is beautiful and terrifying, and it's very narrative. And it's pagan — this is my persistent point of view! In fact, I feel very lucky to have been raised in a religion that I finally realize is pagan, it is rife with minor gods and goddesses which are the saints, and there are all these stories of miracles. And it's very fairy-tale oriented because, obviously, when Catholicism swept through Europe it had to replace paganism and a world of fairy tales. It just took over, substituted. Cast of saints, and miracles. That appeals very strongly to my imagination, and so I was able to identify what I love, at that very earthy, folk level, and at the dramatic level. You know, fourteen stations of the cross, five wounds of Christ, the three days of the death and resurrection, the forty days and nights . . . All those things are extremely powerful, extremely dramatic, extremely

schematic, I mean, that's drama. You don't have to ask how many acts there should be, you don't have to ask on what day the climax occurred — it's all there. It's a narrative structure, it's really charged emotionally, it's lurid. The kind of Catholicism I grew up with is practically lurid. And I loved that. Now, the other aspects of it, the oppressive ones, I think I've probably made myself clear on what I think of that. So the Catholic Church is really a huge influence for me personally, and I recognize that's also a huge influence in the world.

MLL: A lot of what you do with it is to subvert it gently, and not so gently.

AMM: Yeah, I subvert it violently, but I also say “here's why I think people at the grassroots level hang on. Here's what it gives.” Often women, and men too, but women who relate so strongly to the virgin Mary. She is our goddess. I believe that the Catholic Church would not be powerful today if they had not stumbled upon the brilliant idea of using Mary as a trump card, and the virgin birth, which was invented somewhere in the nineteenth century, as dogma. I mean, they didn't care too much about whether it was a virgin birth until somewhere in the nineteenth century when they figured that they would make that official. But it's the covert Catholicism, the covert, woman-centered, pagan . . . that's the Catholicism that I have sympathy for. I mean, my mother's personal relationship with the virgin Mary, I find that very moving, and I know a lot of Catholic women have that. *That's* who they pray to. And they're allowed to. And the Pope very cleverly says it's OK, because Mary is an intermediary. Don't worry, God won't be offended — *[whispering]* God's too busy, he's a man! God won't take your calls, but Mary will take your calls! So this gives you permission. Of course it also keeps you subservient to the Vatican, which just raises the hairs on my head. But I also have a lot of sympathy with that earth-level Catholicism. And I don't have sympathy with the official Vatican top-down Catholicism. Oh, God, it makes me so furious! That's why I like to take the piss out of that, and sound a note or two of the kinds of crimes that are committed in the name of any religion, really — God knows Catholicism doesn't have a monopoly on that. But to allow Mercedes to stray so far into the sin of pride under the guise of humility. There's so much of it that I treasure, that I cherish, but like any big institution, the top-down stuff is going to be horrible.

Anyway, for me it was very telling that my mother and her friends in the Catholic Women's League loved the book. Because they related to it, it's a very Catholic book. And I think it is a very Catholic book. But the Pope

wouldn't think so, and Archbishop Ambrosik here in Toronto wouldn't think so, but the Catholic Women's League thinks so.

MLL: My mother [another "recovering Catholic" from Cape Breton] thinks it's a very Cape Breton book.

AMM: Yeah, it's a very Cape Breton book, a very Catholic book, there are lots of contradictions in it. But the Catholic Church is a big one for me, it's a dragon I'll be fighting for a long time. But I'll also be loving aspects of it, treasuring them, because I'm not out to discredit anyone's beliefs. In fact, quite the contrary.

And in terms of Shakespeare, it's really the centre of the canon. When I went to the National Theatre School and through high school, there was this idea that there's no greater writer than Shakespeare. But I didn't come to love Shakespeare until I started to screw around with Shakespeare. *Then* I developed a love of Shakespeare. I approached it simply as raw material that I thought was probably kind of boring and this was going to be fun. I think [*Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*] ended up a tribute to Shakespeare, it's a testimonial. Because it was done in the spirit of ransacking, and that's what Shakespeare did. And I think the greatest thing you can do for an author is to make free with them, ultimately, or they won't survive. If they're going to survive, they have to survive all kinds of things. And now I understand so much more about Shakespeare, I have a love of Shakespeare having written that play, because there's so much at play in his work. They're very playful. And they're very alive, and I have my own theories about how he wrote them, and I find it very funny that all these academics and people are always talking about "who really was he? Could the son of a glovemaker . . ." Only the son of a glovemaker. Only a middle-class kid could have decided to go to London to work for a company. Because plays don't get written in garrets. I mean, he wrote his plays for a company, for a director. A director who probably gave him the scenarios and said "Here are the acts, here's what happens, fill in all the rest. Do your magic, Will, but here's what has to happen". And he probably had the director working with him as a dramaturge, as a story editor. "Or no, here, the climax has to be here, now there has to be a battle here, oh, all right. Now, you have to have more jokes here, or just let the actor say whatever he wants and then write it down." That comes from my own experience working in theatre, and I can't imagine it was any different for him. In fact, I imagine that he had the greatest situation of all, which was that he had that narrative structural support, and the great actors for whom he wrote, and one scenario after the other. And he had the

Director saying “the audience is clamoring for a story about Antony and Cleopatra”. He was a great, great writer who had that structural help. And had the inspiration of a company of actors to animate it. He could write specifically for people — that’s very exciting to do.

MLL: I’ve read that you feel the playwright isn’t alone in constructing the story. Does this come, at least in part, from your experiences writing in a collective?

AMM: Yeah, I mean, even if you do write the play in a garret, and stay away from rehearsals, ultimately there is a collaboration that occurs. There’s no question. Obviously, in my life, my work has gotten less and less collaborative as I’ve gone along, but I feel as though I couldn’t write novels now if I hadn’t had all that experience in the fray of theatre.

MLL: Are there techniques and strategies that originate in your days writing in that collaborative environment that you take with you, and that you put to play in your current writing?

AMM: Yes, my experience in taking the rough and tumble of criticism is really important to me, because I view my work and criticize it from many different points of view. And I do a lot of cutting and editing on my own. And I’ve learned to recognize, I hope, when I’m just being precious or vain about something. You develop a nose for things. And when you’ve worked collaboratively enough, and you respect the people with whom you work collaboratively, you can say “look, this just doesn’t work”. Or “this is pretty, but it doesn’t belong”. You learn how to knock that ego off you, you learn to get rid of a lot of that vanity, and replace it with something a lot tougher, which is “OK, what works? What’s best? I don’t care where the idea comes from, if it’s the right one we’ll use it”. So it’s that kind of very rough and ready critical point of view.

I still find it kind of odd that I work alone, and that I get to decide anything. I’m much more accustomed to having to show the work, and having 12 to 15 people comment. So I try to do that job for myself. And when I’m at that critical phase of writing, a little later on, I’m approaching it as a reader who doesn’t know anything about any of this stuff. Am I with me or not? And that’s where I bring back that collaborative point of view — in collaborating with the reader. They want to be involved in the story, they want to care. They want to read. I really care that they’re in their seat, reading. Again, it comes from the theatre. I won’t even see them if they leave the theatre, just leave the book somewhere. Or they won’t buy it for their friend. No one will care about

it. And I'll never know why. I have to craft it as though it were a live performance. I don't want people to want to leave.

MLL: Is that performance aspect, the visual sensibility, the strategy behind the illustrations in the novel?

AMM: Well, that is just the love of a traditional book, an old-fashioned book. Because in the book, there is the love of books, and books used to be illustrated. Adult books used to have drawings in them. And I loved that. And I really miss it. Not so much literal drawings of the characters, because I don't want anyone telling me what any of the characters looks like, but decorative stuff.

MLL: But this is more than just decoration.

AMM: Yeah, it's more than that. There's a generosity to it, an old-fashioned quality to it. Because all the drawings belong to the diary excerpts and the little snippets of the New York story, which I wanted to frame as souvenirs, as something lost. Decorating them is a very old-fashioned thing to do — it looks like you've found them in a trunk.

MLL: They are shaped like old fashioned decorations in their placement on the page — but the "stuff" of them, their content, is new.

AMM: I think that's the brilliance of those drawings, is that they pick up on that. There's a traditional, old-fashioned shape, structure, container, and new content. Unexpected, or surprising, or contemporary in opposition to the form.

MLL: Did you draw them?

AMM: No, a good friend of mine, Gina Wilkinson, drew them. She's an actress as well.

MLL: Did you sit down together to determine the content of each drawing?

AMM: No, she just did them. And they were brilliant.

MLL: There are so many extra "treats" for the reader in this book!

AMM: Yeah, my memories, my books from my childhood are my friends, they're so much more than just the text, you know? And I wanted there to be a delight, I wanted the book to be a gift to the reader. And this is

the thing — I don't write things that are supposedly mass-market fiction. I don't sit down with an outline and all that jazz. I could, I mean, I'm perfectly capable of doing that, I've done it for television, but I want to give the reader something completely original, completely new, and yet strangely familiar at the same time. I want to reassure them. It's like taking them to the moon in a station wagon. *[laughter]* You know what I mean? It's okay, it's just an old wood-paneled station wagon, but you'd never believe where we're going! *[laughter]* That kind of thing. Again, the oppositions, to try to sustain the tension between things.

MLL: Yes, and things like the illustrations and the intertexts that your reader will know and recognize, and feel included and proud for having recognized.

AMM: Absolutely! Proud. And they're just ordinary things. It's lovely — it's like finding out that you know somebody in common.

MLL: And the humour you use, as well, is really a way of making the reader feel complicitous . . .

AMM: Yes. It's a way of inviting the reader in, and that's exactly about complicity. And once you've established that complicity, once you've welcomed the reader, then you can do all kinds of weird things! And then, you can be outrageous!

MLL: And you can do things like *Little Women* playing Stations of the Cross.

AMM: Yes! And you can do things like jerking someone off with a communion glove, although some people probably found that very offensive and some people chose not even to notice what was happening — and some of us just thought it was hilarious! *[laughs]*. But those are things you can do when you've said "you're very welcome in this world". It's like, take a real sort of WASP Ontario person who walks by an ethnic café or a pool hall where there are swarthy men in turtlenecks. I mean, *[whispering]* what goes on in there? And they would never dream of going in there. But if they could actually just go in, and hear the conversation, so much of it would be familiar, and much of it would be genuinely foreign and thrilling. But there'd be other things that would allow them to really understand, to enter in. It's that kind of thing.

MLL: I read in an interview you gave *Books In Canada* that you described comedy as a flashlight or a torch that you used to illuminate what was there.

AMM: Yes, it lets you feel a little more comfortable about entering the dark.

MLL: Do you sit down and use humour intentionally to bring the reader in to a dark spot in the text? To break down the barriers that might prevent the reader from entering fully into the text?

AMM: That's something that unfolded quite naturally, and then I recognized what I was doing and then continued to do it on purpose. People delight in being frightened, and then laughing. Having something unexpected happen, and then having things change rapidly. It's funny, no, it's terrifying. It's hilarious, no, I'm scared out of my fucking wits. You know, people *like* that. It comes naturally to me, and I obviously had to shape it a little more, in the manuscript some things came out a little too crudely. Because you want people to stay in. You don't want to catapult them right out of the experience of reading, but you want to push it as far as you can and still keep them there. It's like when your older sibling tells you something terrifying and then says "I was just kidding . . . No, I wasn't . . . Yes I was . . . No, I wasn't" [laughter]. The reader wants you to torture them a bit like that, right? As long as they trust you to tell them the whole story, they'll be with you in the end.

I didn't set out to break down barriers. I wanted to get myself out of the way — I didn't want myself as the capital 'a' Author to be commenting on the story or the characters, or showing how smart I was, or what I think. I wanted to simply present things in such a way that the point of view of the novel can only become apparent upon completion. That you have to read to the end to find out what the point of view is. So that's about not giving my opinion about everything that happens, not making ironic remarks or know-all remarks about "well, little does this character know that twenty years from now. . . ." I had that stuff in earlier drafts but I got rid of it all. It's like I poured some kind of acid on the manuscript and burned away the fat. Because that stuff, I think, keeps the reader out of it. Some people think that makes the reader complicit with the author. But I think the complicity does not belong between author and reader — it belongs between reader and story. Between reader and book.

MLL: You've done that wonderfully, too, by re-telling certain events from a number of different points of view. Was that re-telling something that

you injected after taking those other references out? Or was it already part of the text's original strategy?

AMM: That was in there, that took over, and that helped me. It was only very early on that I was actually in it, for the first hundred pages — as I moved along with the story, it belonged so much more to itself and not to me. So that the other characters' points of view, and my not saying to the reader "you know, I think that's really wrong of them", "little do they know" or "here's my big comment" — as a matter of fact, just getting back to the language question for a moment, I find I'm always drawn towards words that you can really feel in your mouth. When I was a kid, onomatopoeic language really appealed to me as a device. Words as things, as objects, as physical products, you know? Those are often the words that I choose. I'm not an essayist, I don't try to use language that is necessarily intellectually elegant to make a point. I would rather use language that is organically or musically eloquent. Rhythmically eloquent. Emotionally eloquent. And that is unmediated words, which often are Saxon and Germanic root words.

MLL: In parody, you do make commentary — for example, your paraphrase of *The Catholic Wife* in *Fall On Your Knees*.

AMM: Yeah, see, I think that sometimes an author writes in a self-consciously intelligent style, and they don't realize that it's mannered, because it's so much the order of the writing of the day that it's mannered, and it's going to be dated quite quickly. You know, like self-consciously ironic writing. And that's fine, because it has its moments, but I try to write things that . . . it's about what I consider to be the real poetry in the language. For me, the poetry is about the physicality and the sensuality of the language and how it falls upon the ear. And I believe that if it falls well upon the ear, then it will enter the eye in a better way. Because I want it to go right into [the reader], I don't want it to be dancing around in their head as a concept. Not to say that there aren't big concepts that are brought to bear — I just try not to express them in that way. I try to express them very much like words and objects. Experiential. And not to say "she was very upset to hear . . ." No. It's more like her stomach opens up when so and so says such and such. So it's more forensic, you know? Or, "this was the worst moment of her life. She held back a tear". No, it's more like "she pressed her finger against her eye". In other words, describe the physical things. Then, there'll be poetry.

MLL: You have said that you don't intentionally set out to break down barriers. But in *The Arab's Mouth*, *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, and *Fall On Your Knees*, you do give voice to people who wouldn't be the traditional voice of power.

AMM: Yeah, I think that's true.

MLL: You have the little girls in *Fall On Your Knees*, and characters like Ginger and Hector, who cannot speak but who is so eloquent; then you've got Pearl, and Constance, the ignored female academic . . .

AMM: They are people who are marginalized and who want to seize the big things and be part of them. Not be changed by them, but contribute to them. To change those big things.

MLL: Is that a primary goal of your work, to question those power structures and make sure those other voices are heard?

AMM: It's very important for me to do that, it's really important — it's what I do. I don't just want to talk about what's important to little girls, I want to talk about how little girls are important to what's important. They've got a handle on it. They're gonna grab it. That the "marginalized" people have a lot to teach about the centre. And it's interesting, because I think my own immigrant background is all about wanting to seize the mainstream, but not be obliterated by it. I want to seize it, and I want to become part of it, and I want to change it, and I want to say it's mine too, and I'm different. But I don't want to bomb all the old buildings — in fact I love them, could I please have a room in one of them? And it's going to be very different once I'm there. It's all about accretion and transformation as opposed to destruction. I don't go in raze all the products of the patriarchy and the dead white males, I'm just saying "they're mine too. I'm part of it, too."

MLL: So you're bringing the marginalized into the centre, as opposed to visiting them in the margins.

AMM: Exactly! And there's also the thing that I don't want to bomb the Louvre. I'd like my picture in there, thank you very much. And I want to question what you're hanging there. It's about evolution as opposed to revolution. And evolution is very painful, and it can feel like revolution, it can feel like the death of everything that's familiar. I think often we have a hard time distinguishing between what is evolution and what is revolution. And that's very much an immigrant story too — what have I

lost? What have I gained? I have entered the mainstream and I have changed it, and it has changed me. I am not what my parents were. But I am what they wanted me to be, even though it kills them. But, you know, I speak that other language . . .

So, it's very different, saying "I want to burn and raze the world, and create a new one", or "I want to go to the marginalized people and keep them marginalized, and be separatist", those are two very radical, meted opposite ends of the spectrum. Extremes. And I'm not interested in either of those, because I think they're both self-destructive in the end. But you need to borrow aspects of both of them. It's about that tension, that sweaty arm-wrestle.

MLL: That's what Ann-Marie MacDonald's writing is all about.

AMM: Yeah, a big sweaty arm-wrestle. How's that for a lovely macho image? *[laughter]*

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APPLIED IMAGE, Inc.
1653 East Main Street
Rochester, NY 14609 USA
Phone: 716/482-0300
Fax: 716/288-5989

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