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THE MACHINERY OF PATRIARCHY:
Masculinity in the Fiction of Margaret Atwood

by

David C. Bieber

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
and Research in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts

Department of English

Carleton University
Ottawa
December 1992
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**THE MACHINERY OF PATRIARCHY:
Masculinity in the Fiction of Margaret Atwood**

Submitted by David C. Bieber, B.A.
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

Thesis Supervisor

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January 1993

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Dave Bieber
December 1992

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Abstract

Critical discussion of Margaret Atwood's fiction has centred upon her representation of femininity as a subject position within patriarchy; her female characters reveal a limited range of acceptable roles for women, ones which fit into and perpetuate the power relations of a society that Atwood has described as a machine which either incorporates or destroys the individual. Recent work in gender theory strengthens the argument that masculinity is also a subject position created by the culture accompanying a patriarchal order. Atwood's male characters accordingly reveal the constructed nature of conventional masculinity, and its function in positioning individual men into roles which work to maintain the machine of the given social order. Atwood subverts the (re)production of patriarchy at the level of the individual subject by positioning some of her male characters outside the hierarchical roles of dominance or submission forming the parameters of conventional gender difference. The result is a body of work which explores the conservative nature of masculinity as the function of an historically specific hierarchical social organization.

Introduction

Margaret Atwood has examined extensively the position of women in our society. Her seven novels, to date, provide a detailed and eloquent description of the pressure imposed on feminine identity by cultural institutions. Historically specific structures, such as patriarchal hierarchy and consumer capitalism, are revealed to contribute to, and often dictate, the acceptable parameters for seemingly timeless definitions of the proper roles for women. Such definitions of identity tend to allow only a unified concept of self, which Atwood exposes as an abstraction enforced by a totalizing society, an unnatural notion reified by a male, capitalist structure which stands to benefit from a system of individuals who are self-sufficient in regulative behaviour. The operation of Atwood's characters reflects the problem of identity in a society where the only acceptable roles are those which support and perpetuate the already existing structures. In a 1973 interview with Graeme Gibson, she likens the function of society to a machine which reproduces itself at the expense of the individual within it, whose choice of role is influenced by the threat of extinction. "I think people see two alternatives. You can be part of the machine or you can be something that gets run over by it. And I think there has to be a third thing."¹

Given that the specific historical and economic structures which constitute our social

¹Graeme Gibson, *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Anansi, 1973) 31

organization change over time, the roles necessary to perpetuate this "machine" will change accordingly. Atwood's fiction has described the changing positions available to women, and the threat implicit in the selection of more unconventional roles, ones which do not contribute usefully to the smooth and uninterrupted function of the "machine." Men are a part of the "machine" as well; they occupy different positions within it, but these positions are similarly dictated with the interests of structural continuity. Presumably, a writer so concerned with the shifting positions available to women will offer a complementary description of the forces which determine the parameters of acceptable masculinity, a description of the space assigned to men in the power relationship between male and female roles in a patriarchal society.

At a later point in the Gibson interview, while discussing the degree to which the social expectations on men and women fail to provide solid grounding for a sense of personal identity, Atwood suggests that men, in fact, are more severely "amputated" from a sense of self, as their identity is more dependent upon their social position.

[Women] still have some kind of connection with their bodies, and the celebrated women's role, although many people find it, you know, aggravating, still is something to do. If you can't think of what you are supposed to do you can always have a baby, and that will keep you busy enough. But some guy who is doing nothing but punching holes in cards all day, he has no connection with himself at all, and guys who sit around on their asses in an office all day have no contact with their own bodies, and they are really deprived, they're functions, functions of a machine.²

Ever-watchful of the changing understanding of what is considered "normal" in this society,

Atwood must build these observations into her male characters. In order to map this out, it is useful to consider these characters in terms of both their construction and narrative positions

²Gibson, 28

The Construction of Masculinity in Male Characters

In the last few decades, gender theory has seen a shift away from an understanding of male and female roles as a "natural" expression of biological factors.¹ What has emerged is a model which examines the origin and function of gender at the social, rather than individual, level. Anthropologist David D. Gilmore has described gender as a social construct, determined only minimally by biological factors, at the most basic level: "biology does not determine all of our behaviour, or even very much of it, and cultures do indeed vary to some degree in assigning sex roles."² What is assigned by specific cultures tends to be a set of behavioural norms which greatly exaggerate the natural differences of men and women, in order to incorporate their activity into a regulating society. Michael Roper and John Tosh, in the introduction to a collection of articles concerning the history of British masculinity, offer a definition of gender which expresses this dimension of social regulation: "gender is a social system which at any time constructs the opportunities and experience of both men and women."³ In either case the emphasis is on a downward projection of gender: from the structure of society down to the individual, as opposed to considering gender roles as the attributes of individual men and women expanded to create a set of social laws.

I am indebted to Barbara Gabriel for suggesting several indispensable works on this subject

¹David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) 23

²Michael Roper, John Tosh, eds., introduction, *Manful Assertions* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 7

Gilmore's anthropological survey indicates that all societies provide a set of norms for gender-appropriate behaviour. He argues that these roles, which vary among cultures, are a necessary strategy for the preservation of the social order. Gender organizes individuals in order to face challenges to the existing structures of production and survival. Such material concerns constitute "the existential 'problem of order' that all societies must solve by encouraging people to act in certain ways, ways that facilitate both individual development and group adaptation."⁶ While Gilmore includes "individual development" in his definition of gender, it is clear that the development of individuals is encouraged only so far as this contributes to the continuity of particular structures of economics and production. The proper gender behaviour, in all cases, is that which facilitates the continuity of the social order, rather than addressing the needs of individuals: "both women's and men's roles are directed at replicating social structures rather than at some socially neutral or inconsequential path of personal self-fulfilment."⁷

Given the conservative nature of gender roles, operating to maintain the existing structure of society, it follows that when these institutions change, gender roles must shift with them. For this reason, gender is best understood as an historically specific construction, depending on the needs of particular social structures. As an example, we may consider the Industrial Revolution as a massive change of the social modes of production. During this period, the economic system was reorganized into a capitalist system based on factory work, accompanied by an urbanization of the population. This transformation had a dramatic

⁶Gilmore, 3

⁷Gilmore, 225

influence on the respective spheres of what were considered "natural" male and female behaviour. As Mark Gerzon points out, when men began to leave the home in order to work in the factory, a split was created in the responsibility for household tasks which, previously, had been shared in the husband-wife partnership. The factory became the proper realm for men, and since the women stayed at home, this became the female realm. Theirs was the responsibility for all within it:

most child-rearing manuals in colonial America were written for mothers and fathers. Because fathers were nearby, working in a family farm or shop, they played a large role in the rearing of their children, particularly their sons. After industrialization, when men went away to a job, their sons could not follow, and child-rearing advice more often was directed to women only.⁸

The division between the two spheres of home and factory deepened, and developed into a new set of expectations for appropriate gender attributes, which were "naturalized," effectively developing into unquestionable truths of appropriate sexual characterization. Thus what began as a means of responding to the demands of the new factory-based working environment grew into a set of characteristics which were accepted as biological facts. The home and the factory were reified, and polarized into oppositional spheres which represented the relationship between the separate and complementary features of male and female gender. Gerzon describes a philosophy of marriage which attributed qualities of virtue to the woman, and realism to the man:

⁸ Mark Gerzon, *A Choice of Heroes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), 128.

In marriage, the [male] role of the Breadwinner became paramount. The husband-wife relationship was a union of opposites.

She was:

family oriented
pure
gentle
moral
emotional
delicate
weak

He was:

success oriented
worldly
aggressive
pragmatic
rational
tough
strong⁹

While recognizing a similarly discursive grounding of gender attributes in our own time, Atwood seems to grant that industrialism, on the whole, was more disruptive of male identity. In the Gibson interview, she suggests that women's identities didn't change as drastically¹¹ partially because they "didn't have as far down to go," in addition to the obvious biological option of having a child, mentioned above.¹⁰ Men, on the other hand, were cut off from any sense of self which was not constructed by cultural forces. While able to occupy roles in a dominating patriarchy, individual men seem to benefit little more from this structure than the women who must suffer under it. Victor Seidler, in considering the effect of patriarchy on individual men, concludes that individual men are powerless at the expense of the power of the total system: "If we live in a 'man's world' it is not a world that has been built upon the needs and nourishment of men. Rather it is a social world of power and subordination in which men have been forced to compete if we want to benefit from an

⁹Gerzon, 128

¹⁰Gibson, 28

inherited masculinity." ¹¹ Roper and Tosh, who draw upon the writings of Seidler and others, seem to concur. They point out that while men are conferred dominant positions by conventional patriarchy, this positioning does little to benefit individual men, and may actually be harmful. "Indeed the very process of acquiring social dominance may be subjectively experienced as oppression."¹² While it cannot be denied that men have a significant investment in these roles, it must be noted that participation in them is as much the result of social pressure as female participation in submissive positions.

If it is possible for men to choose not to occupy a position of dominance over women, then what mechanisms operate to socialize them so that they usually select a dominating masculinity? Gilmore's survey concludes that an important aspect of masculinity, as prescribed by most cultures, is that of public achievement. Individual men are expected to prove their masculinity, often repeatedly, in the face of a social organization which will consider them "un-men" if they fail. While women face no such tests of the validity of their claim to femininity, men who do not exhibit the attributes demanded by their culture face complete dislocation from it. "Manhood ideologies force men to shape up on penalty of being robbed of their identity, a threat apparently worse than death."¹³ Roper and Tosh offer a similar recognition of the cultural imperative to achieve and maintain the status of manhood:

Despite the myths of omnipotent manhood which surround us, masculinity is never

¹¹Victor Seidler, *Rediscovering Masculinity: Reason, Language and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 21.

¹²Roper and Tosh, 15.

¹³Gilman, 146.

fully possessed, but must perpetually be achieved, asserted and renegotiated. As the anthropologist, Michelle Rosaldo has put it, 'A woman becomes a woman by following in her mother's footsteps, whereas there must be a break in a man's experience. For a boy to become an adult, he must prove himself his masculinity among his peers. And although all boys may succeed in reaching manhood, cultures treat this development as something that each individual has achieved.'¹¹

Gerzon identifies a crucial gap between reaching adulthood and achieving status as a "man."

He suggests that while societies have historically provided cultural "rites of passage" to confer manhood, ours does not. "In Western societies, there are clearly no longer any rites of passage. The very existence of terms such as teenager (the German word is *bwuchstiger*, half-grown) shows that the absence of this social institution results in an in-between stage."¹²

Gerzon notes that warfare is one such social institution for the ritual achievement of masculine status, but suggests that this is no longer viable in an age of nuclear weapons. In a 1978 interview with Karla Hammond, Atwood discusses a lecture by Margaret Mead concerning the use of war as a means of defining the realm of "natural" male function:

She did say, however, that few societies have given weapons to women and sent them out to war. The division is there partly so that men can say they're men. It's very easy to say you're a woman. People use the term 'real woman,' but it doesn't have the same connotation as a 'real man.' If you're not a 'real man' you're not a man. If you're not a 'real woman' -that is, someone's idea of desirable femininity- you're still a woman¹³

¹¹Roper and Toshi, 18

¹²Gerzon, 113

¹³Karla Hammond, "Defying Distinctions," *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersoll (Princeton: Ontario Review Books, 1990), 102

The tremendous pressure on individual men to achieve a socially approved manhood, when combined with a lack of institutions to confer it, leads to a contradiction. Gerzon argues that given this overlap, men will try to prove themselves by less socially constructive means, such as self destructive violence. "With the option of going to war foreclosed, young men seek to prove themselves by performing other manly deeds. The most obvious surrogates for war often involve violence too. It is directed not at the enemy, but at each other and ourselves."¹⁷ Gerzon's list of violent acts by 15-25 year old men can be associated with Barbara Ehrenreich's portrayal of the conflict arising between an excessive need to prove manly stature and the lack of socially productive options for doing so in a declining American middle class. In her short essay, "Marginal Men," she profiles a young man she calls Rick. At 22 years of age, he is still living at home, "in the same room he's occupied since third grade." He is frequently unemployed, working in short-lived jobs, as the sort of opportunities which employed his father's generation are no longer available. She points out that Rick would not want to wear his father's faded machinist uniform at any rate; with a \$300 leather jacket and expectations of stylish living, Rick aspires to a financially powerful manhood ideal that he can never afford. The only power that is within his limited reach is embodied in the handgun he keeps in the glove compartment of his car.

He's also proud. And there's nowhere for him to put that pride except into the politics of gesture: the macho stance, the seventy-five-mile-per-hour takeoff down the expressway, and eventually maybe, the drawn gun. Jobs are the liberal solution; conservatives would throw in "traditional values." But what the marginal men—from Valley Stream to Bedford-Stuyvesant—need most of all is *respect*. If they can't find that in work, or in a working-class life-style that is no longer honored, they'll extract it

¹⁷ Gerzon, 174

from someone weaker – a girlfriend, a random jogger, a neighbor, perhaps just any girl. They'll find a victim.¹⁸

Gerzon's response to this is structural in its approach. Realizing that existing ideals of manhood, presented by the cultural institutions of our consumer society, are constructed to meet the interests of increasing consumption in a market economy, and not to address the needs of individuals, he proposes an alternative set of ideals, composed with the current needs of our society in mind. Setting aside questions of feasibility, what remains is a recognition of the constructed nature of what is currently considered "masculine," in connection with its function in service of the demands of existing social institutions.

Atwood evidently describes contemporary masculinity along similar lines. The construction of her male characters is informed by a sensitivity to the pressure placed on them by the availability of a very narrow range of acceptable roles. Examining the function of these characters – either occupying accepted roles in ways which reveal their discursive nature, or unconventional roles in order to problematize this space – reveals aspects of Atwood's critique of the "machine."

The Position of Male Characters Within Narrative

As a feminist writer, Atwood subverts the formula of narrative structure that is

¹⁸Barbara Ehrenreich, "Marginal Men," *The Worst Years of Our Lives* (New York: Pantheon 1990) 212

characteristic of a patriarchal production of meaning. Teresa de Lauretis has described patriarchy in terms of sexual difference, where female gender is defined by its position within a male-dominated frame of reference. This notion is informed by assumptions of hierarchy, where the male position is that which enjoys the power of a privileged position, leaving the female role to be defined as a passive position in relation to the male centre. Furthermore, she suggests that sexual difference considered within the discourse of male representation is a "conservative force limiting and working against the effort to rethink its very representations." The subversion of patriarchy is not so simple a matter as the reversal of the relationship between male and female positions. "I believe that to envision gender (men and women) otherwise, and to (re)construct it in terms other than those dictated by the patriarchal contract, we must walk out of the male-centered frame of reference in which gender and sexuality are (re)produced by the discourse of male sexuality."¹⁹ A narrative strategy aiming for such disruption must position male characters so as to avoid the preservation of patriarchal relations between characters operating not as representative subjects so much as narrative devices indicating relations of power.

Film theorist Annette Kuhn, writing in *Women's Pictures*, suggests that in order to examine realist texts, character must be understood as a function embedded in narrative: "The notion of character is in fact crucial to any consideration of the classic realist text, cinematic or otherwise. While the classic realist text may mobilize elements of story and plot and produce enigmas and resolutions in the ways I have described, it derives its specificity from

Teresa de Lauretis "The Technology of Gender," *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 17

its articulation of character as a narrative function."²⁰ Given an understanding of the interconnection of character and action such that character functions to organize the text, Kuhn suggests that an analysis of female characters tends to reveal the patriarchal organization of the conventional text. She insists that a female character will operate not as "a concrete gendered human being who happens to exist on the cinema screen rather than in 'real' life: 'she' becomes, on the contrary, a structure governing the organization of story and plot in a narrative or group of narratives."²¹ Such a "woman-structure" activates a male narrative; often it serves as an enigma which a male character moves to solve. A 1979 study by Mary Beth Haralovich, cited by Kuhn, provides an overview of how female characters tend to activate the narrative of mainstream cinema since the 1930's. The findings indicate that the movement of plot from disruption to resolution often depends on a reaffirmation of male dominance over the female role. The conventional narrative moves to restore a "woman-structure" to a submissive role in a patriarchal, heterosexual culture. This is described as "recuperation":

this recuperation manifests itself thematically in a limited number of ways: a woman character may be restored to the family by falling in love, by 'getting her man,' by getting married, or otherwise accepting a 'normative' female role. If not, she may be directly punished for her narrative and social transgression by exclusion, outlawing or even death.²²

Atwood's recognition of this repressive function of cultural images runs throughout her work

²⁰ Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures* (Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1982), 31.

²¹ Kuhn, 32.

²² Kuhn, 32.

It is most clearly presented in *Lady Oracle*, published in 1976, three years before the Haralovich study, where she makes reference to the punishment of "transgressive" women in the classic Hollywood formula by describing the tragic fate of Moira Shearer's ambitious character in *The Red Shoes*.

Feminist texts would presumably attempt to subvert these patriarchal formulas. A direct inversion would yield a male character who, as a "man-structure," would merely figure in the narrative movement of a female character, operating passively and connected with narrative structure only as an object around which it can be organized. This approach is problematic, as de Lauretis suggests above. E. Ann Kaplan notes that beginning in the late 1970's, this sort of inversion could be seen in some Hollywood films. Men became the objects of a female gaze and occupied passive narrative positions. However, in order for the woman to take ownership of the dominant textual position, she had to abdicate any feminine qualities. The position itself seems to constitute the cultural definition of "male" characteristics, independently of the biological individual filling it:

it is significant that in all these films, when the man steps out of his traditional role as the one who controls the whole action, and when he is set up as the sex object, the woman then takes on the 'masculine' role as bearer of the gaze and initiator of the action. She nearly always loses her traditional feminine characteristics in so doing — not those of attractiveness, but rather of kindness, humaneness, motherliness. She is now often cold, driving, ambitious, manipulating, just like the man whose position she has usurped.²³

What results is the preservation of the dominance-submission relationship between "male" and "female" positions in narrative, where, no matter who is filling the role, the "male" position is

²³ E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film* (New York: Methuen, 1983) 29

that which dominates. Direct inversion of patriarchal narrative operates conservatively, despite the appearance of disruption: "women have been permitted in representation to assume (step into) the position defined as "masculine," as long as the man then steps into *her* position, thus keeping the whole structure intact."²⁴

Atwood often inverts the conventional modes of fiction, but she does not use so simple an approach. She does not create narrative structures which stay within the parameters of an opposition between dominating "male" positions and submissive "female" ones. Her novels are usually told from a female character's point of view, and this narrative dominance seems to grant a "male" position. However, they do not exhibit the decidedly un-feminine traits of the "male" narrative position described by Kaplan. Similarly, male characters are often in a "female" position, and yet they do not necessarily function as passive objects of female power. They may operate as "man-structures," and facilitate the narrative progress of a female character without being "recuperated" in the sense that Kuhn discusses. Atwood's positioning of male characters may be considered to follow a "third way," which is not limited to a strict dominance-submission relationship between male and female.

Atwood's work clearly approaches both femininity and masculinity as subject positions within patriarchy. The male and female characters operate within this paradigm, which is constituted by certain relations of power and hierarchy. However, they do not always take up the opposition of accepted male or female positions within this formula; it is not so simple a matter as victor or victim, oppressor or oppressed. The space between these, or lack of it, is critical to an understanding of Atwood's social criticism.

²⁴Kuhn, 29

In 1979, while describing *Lady Oracle* to interviewers Gregory Fitz Gerald and Kathryn Crabbe, Atwood suggested that her work could be divided into two groups of three novels. "*Life Before Man* is a different work altogether [as compared to *Lady Oracle*]. The first three novels comprise a unit, and *Life Before Man* is the first of another unit of three."²⁵ For the purpose of this paper, the construction and position of male characters in these first six novels will be discussed, with reference to the theoretical approaches to masculinity and narrative operation considered above.

Gregory Fitz Gerald, Kathryn Crabbe, "Evading the Pigeonholers," *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, ed. Earl G. Ingersol (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1990) 136

Chapter I

What we have here, if you only look at it closely, this is the little girl descending into the very suggestive rabbit burrow, becoming as it were pre-natal, trying to find her role [...] her role as a Woman. Yes, well that's clear enough. These patterns emerge. Patterns emerge.¹

The graduate school rambling of Fish provides a telling introduction, however parodic, to Atwood's direction in *The Edible Woman*. It carries us from the initial pages, where we are presented with an untroubled Marian McAlpine, to the end of the book, where she peers over the brink of a huge pit, sinking deep into the bottom of a ravine. "It seemed wrong to have a cavity in this city: the ravine itself was supposed to be as far down as you could go. It made her suspect the white pit-bottom also..."²

Indeed, it is clear enough that Marian is Alice. She is faced with an impending marriage, which operates to signify the traditional socially recognized entrance into full "womanhood." The position is one created by patriarchal society, acceptable because it functions in a manner which preserves its power relations. As the date draws near, she begins to chafe against the expectations of how she is to behave, and how she is to fit into this increasingly threatening order. She rejects the few roles that seem available to her, roles of

¹Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Woman* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1969) 194

Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 262

passivity and submission to male demands. She finds each definition of "woman" to be devoid of any substance or secure foundation; each has a false bottom, leading on to another. In the end there is only the complexity of self that is far removed from the artificially unified subject created by, and working to preserve, a culture directed towards male consumption.

But it is, after all, Duncan who has brought her here. This is his place. Like Alice, and like Marian, he too is confronted with an array of roles. He also functions to expose a patriarchy which creates subject positions. He facilitates a recognition of the emptiness behind the facade of gender roles, ultimately problematizing the construction of gender identity that is free of images which reinforce the dominant arrangement of power and submission. "They tell me I live in a world full of fantasies," he says. "But at least mine are more or less my own, I choose them and I sort of like them, some of the time."³ The inscrutability, the unpredictability of Duncan's character signifies his rejection of a limited assortment of acceptable male roles offered by a society which benefits from the formation of individual subjects, both male and female, who are susceptible to the consumer philosophies of contemporary capitalism.

Marian's fiancé, Peter, is constructed as a diametric opposite to Duncan. He is well within the conservative parameters of conventional masculinity. His subject position (which, while shifting over the course of the narrative, provides a survey of normative male roles) both participates in, and preserves the power of the patriarchal structures of society. In Graeme Gibson's 1973 interview, Atwood suggests that: "the person who embodies the restrictive forces of society is in fact the person Marian gets engaged to. In a standard

³Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 263

comedy, he would be the defiant hero. As it is, he and the restrictive society are blended into one, and the comedy solution would be a tragic solution for Marian."⁴ This "anti-comedy" sets forth a Peter that operates as a "man-structure" representing the limiting forces of patriarchal society. In conjunction with Duncan, the two of them form poles, between which it is possible to chart the movement of Marian over the course of the text. Marian begins the story in the company of Peter and the realm of conservative cultural assumptions which are responsible for his constitution.

Peter fits well into David Gilmore's description of masculinity in several ways. He exhibits a great insecurity about the public recognition of his manly position, as can be seen through his frequent displays of competitiveness. Gilmore suggests that the status of manhood is a precarious one which must be proved frequently through the public deeds and contests found in nearly every culture surveyed.⁵ Thus the first mention of Peter, in an offhand comment by Ainsley, makes apparent his need to project an image of masculine power and value: "professional men get so huffy if you know anything about their subject. You know, like Peter,"⁶ she says. Ainsley's comment is only the first of many which would indicate a persistent insecurity about the manhood represented by Peter. Atwood reveals his competitive nature through what seems to be a series of small cruelties to Marian: "he likes me to try to keep up with him," says Marian, describing his drinking habits.⁷ Similar

⁴ Gibson, *Eleven Canadian Novelists* 21

⁵ Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making* 11

⁶ Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 12

⁷ Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 17

incidents reinforce the possibility that Peter's sense of manhood is contingent on the affirmation of his superior strengths and abilities as a provider and consumer. "Peter smiled and chewed, pleasantly aware of his own superior capacity,"⁸ notes Marian, upon realizing that the red meat before her is yet another thing her body seems unable to consume. Later, during his engagement party, Peter is pleased that Marian asks for an ice cube while he is in no need of dilution for his own drink.⁹

While Peter's competitive and demonstrative behaviour conforms to Gilmore's basic description of the male gender role, he is most conventional with regard to accepting and operating within the bounds of a limited range of acceptable male roles. He is the consummate conformist, composed of the best of images for male appearance and behaviour provided by his consumer culture. "He was ordinariness raised to perfection, like the youngish well-groomed faces of cigarette ads."¹⁰ Even his value scale is composed of the proper cues of social position as dictated by advertising. When Marian suggests that he may be rude, he is highly offended by the implication that he is projecting the wrong sort of image. "It put him in the class of the people in the deodorant ads."¹¹ Between the hapless dupes of perspiration and the suave consumers of nicotine, Peter has selected what sort of man he is to be.

He is never outside of this scale: when circumstances demand a change, he jumps into

⁸Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 152

⁹Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 230

¹⁰Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 61

¹¹Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 81

the next appropriate role. He begins, for example, by playing the part of the bachelor. It is evidently a face that he has displayed for some time; we are provided with descriptions of him hunting with a group of male friends who also share in irresponsible bouts of drinking. However, this golden age of freedom from the supposedly stifling world of female influence seems to be coming to an end as more and more of Peter's friends fall prey to marriage. "He and Trigger had found themselves more and more alone on their bachelor drinking sessions during the summer, and when the others did take an evening off from their wives to go along, I gathered from Peter's gloomy accounts that the flavour of the evening was a synthetic substitute for the irresponsible gaiety of the past."¹² Peter is devastated by the news that Trigger has decided to get married. He is left without necessary social reinforcement for his bachelor role. There is no longer an image of himself to recognize in others. "Now Trigger had sunk and the mirror would be empty."¹³ Naturally, it is not long before Peter begins to shift his role in order to compensate for the changing social expectations of him. He proposes to Marian, rationalizing that: "people get suspicious of a single man after a certain age, they start thinking you're a queer or something."¹⁴ With this sort of pressure to discard his bachelor ways, and the engagement to Marian, he must re-define himself. Without missing a beat he moves from being the irresponsible hedonist to playing the part of responsible provider and protector. The change is noted with some astonishment by Marian. "he was changing form in the kitchen, turning from reckless young bachelor into a rescuer from chaos,

¹² Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 27

¹³ Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 27

¹⁴ Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 89

a provider of stability."¹⁴ His old lifestyle, once so sacred and timeless, is discarded without hesitation to facilitate the new role, "having exchanged the free-bachelor image for the mature-fiancé one and adjusted his responses and acquaintances accordingly."¹⁵

Marian observes all this with some interest. Faced with such effortless shifts in Peter's identity and the implied artificiality of his current guise, she begins to wonder what secret self lies at the foundation of his easily changing faces. She imagines that he is responsible for the furtively obscene phone calls of the Underwear Man. "Perhaps this was his true self, the core of his personality, the central Peter who had been occupying her mind more and more lately."¹⁷ Towards the end of the text, it becomes clear that she is increasingly seeing Peter in terms of a series of male roles rather than an individual. During the party, she pictures what Peter will be like in the future; she is reassured by this image of a balding man who will barbecue and wear comfortable pants. "The real Peter, the one underneath, was nothing surprising or frightening, only this bungalow-and-double-bed man, this charcoal-cooking-in-the-backyard man, this home-movie man."¹⁸ But upon discovering that she cannot find herself in this image, she senses menace. As she banishes the future Peter, she notices that he holds a meat cleaver in one hand.

The final presentation of Peter comes just after the breaking of her ties with him. She now pictures him with nostalgia, imagining an appropriately dated role. "She could see him in

¹⁴ Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 89.

¹⁵ Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 120.

¹⁶ Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 118.

¹⁷ Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 242-243.

her mind, posed jauntily in the foreground of an elegant salon with chandeliers and draperies, impeccably dressed, a glass of scotch in one hand."¹⁹

Clearly, Peter's masculinity is thoroughly constructed, using the building blocks provided by our culture; blocks which neatly fit together to form the structure of patriarchy. His various roles all participate in a conventional masculinity, as all are portrayed in conjunction with a dominating narrative position, closely resembling the "male" position as described by Kuhn and others. Like the male observer implied by a culture of patriarchal ownership, as theorized by John Berger,²⁰ he directs much of Marian's initial identity, his gaze determining her appearance through his approval or disapproval. He is the owner and operator of the camera, which he wields with all the predatory hunger of his hunting days, threatening to capture and possess Marian's image, and therefore her normative social worth as a female. He is the oppressor, and Marian is the oppressed, initially. Marian moves away from her position in this dominance-submission relationship, but not by an inversion of this formula. She does not move to the "male" position of dominance; such a solution would have the unfortunate result of reaffirming the patriarchal narrative formula, defined as it is by the relations of power between dominating and dominated characters. Interestingly, Atwood seems to provide an illustration of this point with the interaction of Ainsley and Len Slank. Ainsley's scheming and manipulation of the unsuspecting and traumatized Len clearly places her as a woman operating in a "male" narrative position. Her power over Len does not liberate her; rather it victimizes Len and eventually consumes Ainsley. She is reduced to the

¹⁹Atwood, *The Edible Woman*, 272.

²⁰John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 45-64.

fearful conviction that if her child lacks a genuine father image, it will grow up as a homosexual. Buckling under the pressure of a society which resists any challenge to a rigid division of male and female gender, Ainsley's character invokes homosexuality as a spectre of gender anarchy.

No such reversal can be seen in the positioning of Marian. At the end of the book, having recognized and rejected the socially dictated roles available to her as a woman, she is now nearer to the narrative pole represented by Duncan, the unconventional subject, occupying a space which is apparently beyond the parameters of the conventional culture. Marian, like Duncan, is no longer in a dominated position; but neither do they operate as the dominators.

Duncan is constructed along the lines of no recognizable socially provided role; he is neither a cigarette nor a deodorant ad. Marian's first encounter with him stresses his unsightliness and utter contrast to the healthy, soap-scented Peter. "He was cadaverously thin; he had no shirt on, and the ribs stuck out like those of an emaciated figure in a medieval woodcut."²¹ His image is so strange that Marian at first takes him for a fifteen year old boy; her final attempt to situate him in medieval art serves to suggest that the proper terms to describe him are simply not provided by the references of Marian's culture. Her next encounter with him, during a Western movie at the theatre, works to place him in more direct contrast to the popular language of male appearance and behaviour: as "gigantic stetsoned men stretched across the screen." Duncan is seen slouched in his seat eating pumpkin seeds.

²¹Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 48

"She studied his dim profile, the nose and one eye and the shadowed hunch of one shoulder."²² Unlike Peter, he does not develop an image composed of ads and movie images; in fact he does not attempt to cultivate any image at all, and is unconcerned about the construction of a social face. When Marian discovers that he has broken his bathroom mirror with a frying pan, he explains: "I've got my own private mirror. One I can trust, I know what's in it. It's just public ones that I don't like."²³

Having refused any conventional male role, Duncan has no pretensions to the attributes of protector and provider so actively displayed by Peter, both in Gilmore's sense of cultural masculinity, and in Kuhn's descriptions of narrative dominance. Duncan is weak and frail, but is fully aware of this and feels no obligation to regard this as an inadequacy. "He sounded faintly smug about his own helplessness,"²⁴ Marian comments, contrasting him to Peter, whose masculine identity seems to depend on being able to eat and drink more than her. "I guess now I'm supposed to crush you in my manly arms,"²⁵ says Duncan, during their awkward sexual encounter, ridiculing the popular image of the powerful man making love to the submissive and delicate woman.

Duncan's admitted lack of concern for Marian further indicates his rejection of the protector role. "The extent to which he could ignore her point of view was amazing,"²⁶ and yet Marian prefers this treatment to the somehow demanding attention of Peter. "She found

²² Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 124

²³ Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 140

²⁴ Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 247

²⁵ Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 257

²⁶ Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 189

his lack of interest comforting, though she didn't want to know why."²⁷ It is possibly because Duncan's relationship with her, while expressly one which uses her as an expendable feature, makes no demands on the behaviour of either Duncan or Marian, while the relationship between Marian and Peter increasingly demands that both he and she behave in certain limited ways.

The final result is that Duncan appears as a vague and multiple character, not determined by the dominant understanding of masculinity in this culture. In fact, he is not determined by any one role at all. His casual deceptions and subtle shifts keep Marian from seeing him at times as little more than a shadowy wraith. He confesses that he wants to be an amoeba, because they're "sort of shapeless and flexible. Being a person is getting too complicated."²⁸ Duncan does not operate on the level of social positioning which Peter takes to be his natural identity; he dismisses them as parts to be played, and thus far removed from the reality they ostensibly represent. "I'd like something to be real," he says. "Not everything, that's impossible, but maybe one or two things."²⁹ Because he scorns the available public reality of cigarette ads in favour of one less determined by the values of consumer capitalism, he appears unreal to Marian. As he speaks his voice comes to her from no recognisable source, nearly drowned out by the background noise of official public imagery. "The voice came from a mouth she couldn't see, as though from nowhere; it was foreshortened, blunted,

²⁷ Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 184

²⁸ Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 201

²⁹ Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 201

as if it was being blotted up, absorbed by the snow."³⁰ But despite the pressure against him, Duncan persists in his own space. "She almost expected him to have evaporated into the white expanse of the ravine, but he was still there, a dark shape against the snow, crouched on the edge and gazing into the empty pit."³¹

It is relevant at this point to consider the nature of the space that Duncan has defined for himself. Certainly he does not fit in with Gilmore's model, other than to the extent that by refusing to be socialized into a conventional male role Duncan is subverting the structures of his society. Insofar as the text positions him as the victor over Peter and the shackles of conventional masculinity, he occupies a dominating position in the narrative. However, as he does not dominate Marian, he cannot truly be considered to fill the "male" position of a patriarchal text. In fact, he fits into neither position. This intermediate space, as it turns out, is problematic.

What Duncan is victorious over, specifically, are the roles that are played by Peter: first the bachelor and then the provider. Barbara Ehrenreich has described the changing forms of male revolt against the demands of socially acceptable masculinity since World War II in *The Hearts of Men*. According to her research, Peter's male attributes would seem dated, even for 1969. His bachelor behaviour, distinguished by his resistance to marriage and his conspicuous consumption, corresponds to what Ehrenreich defines as the Playboy rebellion against the male role of provider and protector. The Playboy attacked the notion that a man should be mature and productive for the sake of supporting a wife and family. The individual

³⁰Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 261

³¹Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 265

pursuit of pleasure was an increasing possibility with post-war prosperity, and the Playboy wanted the good life without any responsibility to a wife. It was a novel development. "In 1953, the notion that the good life consisted of an apartment with mood music rather than a ranch house with barbecue pit was almost subversive," writes Ehrenreich.³²

As a rebellion, the Playboy lifestyle was not so treasonous as it first appeared. The Playboy had nothing against productivity and consumption; he just didn't want to share it. In fact, the movement helped establish the acceptability of the excessive consumption needed to boost the American economy: "at the macroeconomic level, nothing could have been more in conformity with the drift of American culture than to advocate the life of pleasurable consumption."³³

Interestingly, when Peter gives up the role of bachelor Playboy, he moves into the very ranch house with barbecue pit he previously despised. His transformation to provider is accompanied by conservative ideals of family economics: "he considered it unfair to marry, he said, if you couldn't afford to support your wife."³⁴ Such unquestioning acceptance of the support of a wife belongs to an era earlier than that of the Playboy. Ehrenreich's description of the "gray flannel rebel" seems to fit Peter well.

The gray flannel rebel lived by the rules. He accomplished his major "developmental tasks" by his late twenties, found a wife and made the appropriate adjustments to marriage, established himself in a white-collar job that would lead, over the years, to larger offices and longer vacations, bought a house, and nestled into the "congenial

³² Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men* (New York: Doubleday, 1983) 44

Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men* 44

³⁴ Atwood, *The Edible Woman* 108

social group" with whom he would share highballs and the tribulations of lawn maintenance.³⁵

The extent of his rebellion, according to Ehrenreich, was a cautious suspicion that something might be wrong with this lifestyle: certainly a great deal less than the rejection of marriage taken up by the later Playboys. For Peter to move from Playboy to Gray Flannel, as confirmed by Marian's vision of his balding suburban future, would seem to be a curiously counter-chronological movement away from any sort of rebellion against socially reinforced male roles. Of course, this sort of direction could be considered appropriate for the construction of such a conservative character. More importantly, the shift easily conserves Peter's position of power in his relationship with Marian.

Duncan, of course, rejects both these roles and any others that may have been available to him, opting instead for the shapeless and indefinable identity represented by the empty pit. This ultimate rejection of the consumer society may suggest that his construction is connected with the Beat movement. Ehrenreich quotes from Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*, written a decade before the creation of Duncan. Kerouac's Beat heroes refuse "the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn't want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, at least fancy new cars."³⁶

For Duncan to resemble a Beat is not in itself a bad thing. As a clumsy and often bizarre movement, it nevertheless offered a viable alternative for men interested in escaping

³⁵Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men* 28

³⁶Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men* 52

the corporate and family structure for a way of life that proposed, among other things, a possibility for more egalitarian relations with women. However, Duncan is not so much Beat as he is *beatnik*. As Ehrenreich explains, the beatnik was a product of the media response to the discovery of the Beat movement. This popular interpretation of the Beats appeared on television and in newspapers with such visibility that they eclipsed the original version. "The Beats were speedy, 'mad to live,' while their images and imitators were studiously 'cool' conformists, like everyone else, but cut from a different mold."³⁷

This distortion was used against the Beat movement by the very institutions it rejected. This is significant, as it provides an illustration of the manner in which the media, as a cultural institution operating along the lines of Althusser's Ideological State Apparatus, resists any challenge to the existing order of gender positioning. A series of *Playboy* articles on the Beats argued that while Playboys did not get as much sex as the Beats, the Beats did not enjoy it as much, because their legendary coolness prevented them from enjoying anything. Duncan certainly resembles this caricature; about the only thing he enjoys over the course of the book is making fun of the *Moose Beer* ad.

It would seem then that Duncan's rejection of the dominant masculinity is equated with an inability to feel enthusiasm over anything. However, within the larger context of the book's narrative, the final effect is a reflection of the lack of space for the development of subjectivities, both male and female, independent of ones which function to reproduce the power inequalities of gender in the patriarchal paradigm.

³⁷Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men* 53

Chapter II

Atwood's patriarchal paradigm is foregrounded with *Surfacing*, which features a female narrator moving about in the heart of a masculine space, represented physically by a region of northern Quebec steeped in the imagery of the rustic hunting lodge. While Duncan led Marian to the empty pit of gender roles, the unnamed main character of this novel sets out to find a missing father. This quest brings her into conflict with the patriarchal forces around her, thus exposing the discursive workings of tradition and domination by men playing the roles that constitute and preserve conventional power relations between gender positions. The men in this sphere are revealed as participants in a role-playing exercise rooted firmly in current cultural assumptions. It is a sphere of male fantasy, where suburban insurance salesmen can put on the guise of the rustic hunter they see in the bourbon ads. They are: "the tourists, the businessmen in plaid shirts still creased from the cellophane packages."¹ After a day of drinking beer and shooting at anything that moves, they will retire to the lodge, a setting as discursively grounded as the cellophane-packed parts they are playing. "It's an imitation of other places, more southern ones, which are themselves imitations, the original someone's distorted memory of a nineteenth century English

¹Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (Toronto: PaperJacks, 1973) 18

gentlemen's shooting lodge."²

The rural Quebec depicted by Atwood is also a place of fathers and sons, and an unwavering male lineage to link them. Paul, an old friend and companion of the absent father, marks the first stop on the voyage into this realm. He is appropriately indicative of the patriarchy which frames him and which Atwood proposes to explore. She describes the houses set up by Paul, a world of his making in defiance of the woods, "built for his son and his son-in-law and his other son, his clan."³ Paul is friendly but distant, uncomfortable with discussing such business with the daughter, and not her husband, whom he asks for. "What he means is that a man should be handling this."⁴ More specifically, this man should be the son or son-in-law of this lost father.

The narrative is activated by the missing father, who operates as a disruption of order. This enigma is solved, not by a son, who would thereby symbolically achieve his manhood, but by a daughter. Male lineage is broken. It is a reversal of the conventional story of patriarchy, breaking the line from father to son. When the father is finally found, it does not signal a conventional resolution; his position in the social order is not reaffirmed, allowing a son to inherit its power. Rather, his position is dismantled, and the order of patriarchy is not restored. The male roles that fit into this convention are not exempted from the disruption: as in *The Edible Woman*, the artificiality of their construction is exposed. Thus we are allowed to see that while Paul may be the most conventional male of the story, even

²Atwood, *Surfacing* 30

³Atwood, *Surfacing* 20

⁴Atwood, *Surfacing* 25

his position is patently a constructed identity. "Paul justified for him his own ideal of the simple life," writes Atwood, describing the admiration of the father for this uncomplicated rural man, "but for Paul the anachronism was imposed, he'd never chosen it."⁵ His identity is a subject position generated by a patriarchal society; like all men, his only choice is whether or not to participate in masculinities which perpetuate the order.

And so we are again led to an emptiness at the foundation of accepted masculine positions. The sphere of manhood represented by the father's island is described with appropriately disorienting imagery. "Around us, the illusion of infinite space or of no space, ourselves and the obscure shore which it seems we could touch," she writes, describing the canoe moving across the lake. "It's like moving on air, nothing beneath us holding us up."⁶ Like Duncan's pit, this traditional, male place constructed by Atwood is devoid of anything more substantial than a collection of cultural images.

Her father's patriarchal position is taken apart in two ways. First, he is associated with the male lineage expressed through Paul, both through his position in the narrative, and through direct description. Trying to remember what her father was like, she reflects that "he would have wanted a dynasty, like Paul's, houses and descendants proliferating around him."⁷ As we have seen, the narrative form rejects this continuity. Second, his position is associated with rationality, a world-view supposedly the product of the logical male mind. "He admired what he called the eighteenth century rationalists: he thought of them as men who had

⁵Atwood, *Surfacing* 24

⁶Atwood, *Surfacing* 72

⁷Atwood, *Surfacing* 37

avoided the corruption of the Industrial Revolution and learned the secret of the golden mean, the balanced life."⁸ The rationality of the father and of these classical thinkers becomes the essence of his identity, hence with his masculine construction.

However, as soon as she has established her father's role as rationalist it begins to come unravelled; her father's philosophical heroes turn out to be incapable of sustaining the "golden mean" they advocate: "It astounded me to discover [...] that Burns was an alcoholic. Cowper was a madman. Doctor Johnson was a manic-depressive and Goldsmith was a pauper. There was something wrong with Thompson also: "escapist" was the term he used. After that I liked them better, they weren't paragons any more."⁹ In addition to making these formidable men more likeable, this has the effect of revealing the contradictions within the rationality they, and her father, represent. The condemnation is not so sweeping as to dismiss such philosophical organization (apart from the fact that her father's scientific work as a surveyor ultimately facilitates the destruction of the Canadian Shield by "Americans", which may actually work to attest to the effectiveness of rationality, even if, as in this case, the wrong ends are those furthered), but rather to suggest the discursive origins of the father's ideal masculine role. With the discovery of this contradiction in her father's apparently stable masculinity, she is increasingly concerned with the possibility that he was not what he seemed to be, and that he was in fact someone entirely different from his social appearance. She recalls playing hide and seek with him in the evenings of her childhood: "even when we knew which tree he had gone behind there was that fear that what would come out when you

⁸Atwood, *Surfacing* 42

⁹Atwood, *Surfacing* 42

called would be someone else."¹⁰

The revelation that he may have been someone else under the familiar Father mask develops into the obsessive idea that he is not dead at all, but hiding, having fled from a society whose restrictive nature is making its pressure known to the narrator. The patriarchy which limits her alternative to acceptable femininity also determines the subject positions available to her father. She begins with a retrospective recognition of his reclusive tendencies "As it was he withdrew; we could have lived all year in the company town but he split us between two anonymities, the city and the bush. In the city we lived in a succession of apartments and in the bush he picked the most remote lake he could find." ¹¹ Further description by the narrator credits him with rejecting not only the roles expected of him by society but by particular privileging of patriarchal lineage as well. He apparently led a life in the bush in defiance of his culture's enthusiasm for the linear progress necessary to capitalist market philosophy, so as to return to the time of unstructured possibility led by the early explorers of the land, long in advance of his family history: "he needed an island, a place where he could recreate not the settled farm life of his own father but that of the earliest ones who arrived when there was nothing but forest and no ideologies but the ones they brought with them."¹²

The narrator continues to insist on this version of her father, increasingly mystifying his escape until he appears to operate as a heroic instance of rejecting the male gender roles

¹⁰ Atwood, *Surfacing* 54

¹¹ Atwood, *Surfacing* 63

¹² Atwood, *Surfacing* 63

which are both accepted by and supportive of patriarchy. The mystification reaches religious proportions before it is finally undone. "No total salvation, resurrection. Our father, Our mother, I pray, Reach down for me, but it won't work: they dwindle, grow, become what they were, human."¹¹ She accepts the death of her father, accepts that he died while trying to research the rock paintings, and so accepts the complicity of his masculinity with the social order which now threatens her. Any notions of her father's identity as an essential quality are dismissed.

In addition to dismantling the patriarchal positions of Paul and the father, the narrative also provides male characters who, as in *The Edible Woman*, function as opposing poles in the female narrator's movement through the problems of identity in a society which depends on a limited range of subject positions. Against a background of patriarchy, David and Joe describe alternative male positions. There is no question of the constructed nature of their masculinity, neither has any hold on the traditional roles represented by Paul or the father. The source of their construction, and the effect of it, is revealed by the details of their position in relation to the narrator.

From the beginning, David operates in defiance of traditional male behaviour. This seems to include a recognition of the artificiality of his own behaviour. "David says they're the new Renaissance Men, you teach yourself what you need to learn," relates the narrator, as David explains his decision to enter the territory of making films. It is a new role for him, the latest of many it would seem. He is adept at shifting his behaviour, playing many parts that seem to be derived largely from popular culture. "He smacked his lips and posed, pretending

to be a TV ad," says the narrator, revealing the commercial imagery of his best attempt to compliment Anna on her cooking. "David thinks he's the great white hunter," says Anna, amused at his efforts to play into the region's hunting lodge atmosphere.¹⁴

Insofar as David's male behaviour is demonstrated to be a role, he is little different from Paul or the father. In this way he is also similar to Peter in *The Edible Woman*. However, unlike these other male characters, his apparent awareness of the shifting nature of his own identity seems to lead to a parody of all male behaviour and positioning. "David is slipping into his yokel dialect; he does it for fun, it's a parody of himself, the way he says he talked back in the fifties when he wanted to be a minister and was selling Bibles door-to-door."¹⁵ Accordingly, he plays a greater variety of roles than do the other male characters, moving from one to the other in no logical order or response to social expectations, unlike Peter. The effect of this is a subversion of the veracity of all male roles. And yet he is no Duncan. The subversion of masculinity that David does represent is less a rejection of patriarchal roles as a parody of them. He does not refuse to play roles, as does Duncan; instead he plays them but does not take them seriously. It is less of a critical stance than it is just another form of role playing, for in spite of any implicit criticism of conventional masculinity, his narrative position is as oppressive towards the narrator as any element of patriarchal society. He is anti-traditional, but he is not anti-patriarchal. He is dismissed as nothing more than a senseless assortment of roles all wadded together in one great pretender "he was an imposter, a pastiche, layers of political handbills, pages from magazines, *affiches*,

¹⁴Atwood, *Surfacing* 95

¹⁵Atwood, *Surfacing* 30

verbs and nouns glued on to him and shedding away."¹⁶ However, this apparently impotent construction is contradicted by his callous domination of the female characters. This very contradiction is central to the construction of what Atwood names "Americans": they are male characters whose Canadian nationality is secondary to their threatening domination and consumption of everything around them.

"We used to think they were harmless and funny and inept and faintly loveable, like President Eisenhower."¹⁷ The American, according to Atwood, is apparently friendly, and has a great love of the disposable productions of the consumer culture. "They liked everything collapsible."¹⁸ However, beneath the neighbourly demeanour lies the malice of the omnivorous consumer, whose consumption is an end in itself. They function to signify a recognition of the lack of meaning at the foundation of their society which is used, not for critical confrontation, but as an excuse to do anything. "That was their armour, bland ignorance, heads empty as weather balloons: with what they could defend themselves against anything."¹⁹ What Duncan recognizes as the space at the heart of gender roles causes him to withdraw from participation in his society, and while this is not the most productive reaction it at least presents criticism. On the narrative level, this reaction facilitates the destruction of the patriarchal order of dominance-submission gender relations. On the other hand, the American, such as David, whose own identity is a product of the devaluing philosophy of

¹⁶Atwood, *Surfacing* 162

¹⁷ Atwood, *Surfacing* 71

¹⁸ Atwood, *Surfacing* 71

¹⁹Atwood, *Surfacing* 137

consumer culture, reduces everything around him to a category of consumption. This is represented by the dead and mutilated heron they find hanging in a tree near the Americans: "it was valueless, but it couldn't be tamed or cooked or trained to talk, the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it. Food, slave or corpse, limited choices."²⁰ David's relentless consumption of images and of the female body clearly locates him in the position of dominance associated with conventional masculinity.

Of course, David's reaction to the mutilated heron is in keeping with an appetite for meaningless images: "it looks so great, you have to admit."²¹ He insists on using it in *Random Samples*, the film that he is putting together, which consists of interesting images strung together with no order or intent. "We need that," he says, "we can put it next to the fish guts."²² He is ordering the world around him in the way that he has ordered himself: a chaotic stream of cultural fragments, of random samples.

Despite David's representation of the discursive nature of male roles constituting patriarchy, he is, in the end, still operating to preserve structures of male dominance. His narrative relation to the female characters is determined by his ownership of what John Berger refers to as the male gaze. It is significant that his wife Anna is the next subject of *Random Samples*, placed alongside the heron, making clear the destructive nature of his male visual consumption.

The narrator's relation to Paul, the father, and David, has subverted the validity of

²⁰Atwood, *Surfacing* 126

²¹Atwood, *Surfacing* 125

²²Atwood, *Surfacing* 125

male roles in traditional patriarchy and demonstrated the conservative nature of anti-traditional consumer culture male roles; only Joe seems to operate in a narrative position which is not patently "male" in its power relations. "I'm sitting in the back seat with the packsacks; this one, Joe, is sitting beside me chewing gum and holding my hand,"²³ reads the first description of Joe, evoking the qualities of a child, or at least of innocence. Further passages reinforce this impact. Others portray him as an animal, somehow wild and primitive. "From the side he's like the buffalo on the US nickel, shaggy and blunt-snouted, with small clenched eyes and the defiant but insane look of a species once dominant, now threatened with extinction."²⁴ In either case, as in all other descriptions of Joe, it is notable that the language used and the images evoked are far removed from the advertising references used in association with David. He is always drawn with something other than human imagery. This has the effect of releasing him from the parameters of conventional masculinity and its patriarchal attributes. Being outside of these terms of dominance or submission, he is neither a victim, nor a victimizer. He participates in David's abuses of the female characters, but not, it would seem, out of any need to fill a position of power. It is simply a position to fill, and Joe does not seem to have one otherwise. As in *The Edible Woman*, the masculine space, outside of the simple power relations of patriarchy, is problematized by the function of an ineffable character. There is no readily available space that falls between the extremes of oppressor and oppressed. What falls into this space can only be half-formed in the eyes of the dominant culture, as Joe is in the eyes of the narrator. "...he isn't an American," says the

²³ Atwood, *Surfacing* 8

²⁴ Atwood, *Surfacing* 8

narrator, at the close of the book, "I can see that now: he isn't anything, he is only half-formed, and for that reason I can trust him."²⁵ This semi-formation is accompanied by disorientation and confusion, which further emphasizes his dislocation from conventional subject positioning, "he woke me when it was still dark, sitting up and saying 'Where is this'" Every time we're in a new place he does that."²⁶

The narrator chooses him because "he is nothing." David is also nothing, because of the constructed nature of his identity, but his relation to the narrator and other women is limited to the power relations of patriarchy. Joe is nothing, because he does not fit into the masculine formula demanded by his society. And so we are once again presented with the dubious victory of Duncan, the hero of emptiness. Joe, even more than Duncan, operates outside the sphere of socially conditioned masculinity. In both cases we see that the problem is that there *is* no such space.

²⁵ Atwood, *Surfacing* 207

²⁶ Atwood, *Surfacing* 45

Chapter III

The absence of intermediate space in the power relations of patriarchy is explored further in *Lady Oracle*, this time by considering the manner in which this is reflected in female narrative strategies. *Lady Oracle* presents us with another female narrative, a search for identity, as before, but instead of turning a traditionally male narrative on its head, a "woman's form" is parodied. As Atwood explained to Karla Hammond in 1978: "I'm interested in the Gothic novel because it's very much a woman's form. Why is there such a wide readership for books that essentially say, 'Your husband is trying to kill you?'"¹ Atwood explores the Gothic form as a narrative response which reflects the effect of dominant patterns of subjectivity limiting women to roles of submission, and men to roles of power. She has described *Lady Oracle* as an "anti-Gothic," and suggests that it reveals the problems of male and female identity within these conventional roles:

I think that in an anti-Gothic what you're doing is examining the perils of Gothic thinking, as it were. And one of the perils of Gothic thinking is that Gothic thinking means that you have a scenario in your head which involves certain roles - the dark, experienced man, who is possibly evil and possibly good, the rescuer, the mad wife, and so on - and that as you go to real life, you tend to cast real people in these roles as Joan does. Then when you find out that the real people don't fit these roles, you can either discard the roles and try to deal with the real person, or discard the real

¹Hammond, "Defying Distinctions," *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, 107

person.²

Lady Oracle's anti-Gothic form reflects the forces working to confine gender subjectivity to limited forms, and which perpetuate these patriarchal power relations. The roles within the novel are associated with the positions in which society situates individuals. Joan Foster keeps trying to locate herself, and others, within the Gothic discourse. As a result, she is initially able to interact with men in dominating positions only. Ultimately, she moves away from such a reductive view of gender roles, and rejects the restricted, artificially unified subject encouraged by both the Gothic narrative and the patriarchal culture. Within this narrative structure, male characters tend to figure less as representations of this restrictive social order; rather they are functions of it, operating within the space between the roles provided by the dominant culture. The hero/villain duality of the Gothic discourse is used to introduce male characters whose masculinity is composed of contradictory elements, both exposing the artificiality of the unified masculine traits expected in our culture, and presenting an alternative narrative "man-structure," one which operates outside the parameters of patriarchal power relations.

As part of her parody of the Gothic discourse, Atwood makes reference to the "recuperative" function of the conventional Hollywood formula. Joan's favourite movie conforms very well to the conclusions of the Haralovich study:

the one I liked best was *The Red Shoes*, with Moira Shearer as a ballet dancer torn between her career and her husband. [...] I munched faster and faster as she became more and more entangled in her dilemma. I wanted those things too. I wanted to

² J. R. (Tim) Struthers, "Playing Around" *Margaret Atwood: Conversations* 64

dance and be married to a handsome orchestra conductor, both at once - and when she finally threw herself in front of a train, I let out a bellowing snort that made people three rows ahead turn around indignantly.¹

The lesson is clear: a woman who tries to be more than one thing at once, who tries to escape from a passive role, will come to a bad end. As Annette Kuhn points out, in *Women's Pictures*, a female character attempting to transgress the submissive role accepted as "normative" for women in our society will be dealt a narrative blow in the form of "exclusion, outlawing, or even death."⁴ The nature of such normative roles for men and women provides the direction of *Lady Oracle*. Like Moira Shearer's character, Joan stretches the boundaries of the female position in conventional narrative: she wants to both dance and have the love of a good man. She too is punished for her transgression, although she escapes the severe finality of many Hollywood narratives. In the end she manages to achieve a victory of sorts: a multiplicity of selves which subverts the function of traditional narrative as a process of limiting female characters to single, unified, normative roles.

The pattern is similar to that found in the earlier two novels: the patriarchal narrative structure is dismantled by the subversion of the roles which prop it up. Instead of following the trajectory of a male character whose progress is marked at intervals by a female figure who functions as a "woman-structure,"⁵ a female trajectory is depicted. In *Lady Oracle*, as earlier, male characters function in a manner which propels the progress of a female protagonist.

¹ Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (Toronto: Seal, 1977), 79.

⁴ Kuhn, 34.

⁵ Kuhn, 32.

The progress of Joan Foster is, of course, a movement away from the unified role encouraged by her society, towards a multiple identity which does not limit her to a position which supports hierarchical forces. This seems to be activated by male characters who, from early on, display these qualities of multiplicity. Joan is still in Brownies when her encounter with the Daffodil Man leads her to suspect that men may not fit easily into the society represented by her mother's expectations: "My mother's two categories: nice men did things for you, bad men did things to you."⁶ But it is not so simple. She realizes that what the Daffodil Man does makes him a bad man, and yet he is not at all what she had come to expect. "He was a nice-looking man, neither old nor young, wearing a good tweed coat, not at all shabby or disreputable."⁷ In every way apparent to her at the time, there is little to distinguish him from the man who, a week later, rescues her from the mischief of fellow Brownies. "The man was neither old nor young; he was wearing a tweed coat and carrying a newspaper under his arm. He smiled at me, and I couldn't tell at all whether or not it was the man from the week before, because he had a hat on."⁸ Clearly, Joan's mother would call this second man a good man, making the one from the week before a bad man; very simple, very clean. But Joan has decided that they are in fact the same man and the implications – as she is aware, are significant. "Was the man who untied me a rescuer or a villain? Or, an even more baffling thought: was it possible for a man to be both at once?"⁹ The answer appears to be

⁶Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 66

⁷Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 57

⁸Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 60

⁹Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 61

yes: it is possible to play more than one role at the same time, not only for every male character of the book but for Joan as well. The example is set forth for her by every man she is involved with. Her father, Arthur, Paul the Polish Count and Chuck Brewer the Royal Porcupine are all evoked in the description of the Daffodil Man, with its suggestion of simultaneous malevolence and benevolence: "he was elusive, he melted and changed his shape like butterscotch or warm gum, dissolving into a tweedy mist, sending out menacing tentacles of flesh and knotted rope, forming again as a joyful sunburst of yellow flowers."¹⁰

Certainly the construction of male characters in this novel seems to suggest that they are fundamentally divergent. Each represents an identity based on role playing rather than any essential masculinity. Even relatively minor characters are described in such a way as to emphasize the artificiality and mutability of these identities. Men are consistently portrayed as participating in the male discourse through fantasy scenarios, and many are shown to shift from one role to another. Sam, for example, as a member of Arthur's political circle, is given to violent schemes which extend far beyond his capacity for action. "Poor gentle Sam, with his violent theories; he wouldn't hurt a fly."¹¹ When faced with the possibility of being arrested in connection with their plot to blow up the Peace bridge, the degree of invention founding his pretensions to being a nationalist-terrorist is again exposed. "Sam was shaken. His escape fantasy had come to life at last, and he didn't like it."¹² The very minor character of Mr. Morgan, mentioned only once, is depicted so as to make the point that he is briefly

Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 61

Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 339

Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 298

enjoying the fantasy of playing some part outside his normal, carefully defined identity. "Mr Morgan looked serious and responsible; he was having the time of his life, he was important at last, he was acting out his own fantasy."¹³ Other characters seem constructed to demonstrate shifting between these conventional male roles. John, the immigrant chef of the Bite-A-Bit restaurant, seems consistent and one-dimensional in his initial presentation. But when he is next encountered, he has realized his dream of marrying and starting up his own restaurant; he is now Zerdo, and when confronted with Joan's recognition, he denies the old role. "I beg your pardon, madame," he said. "My name is Zerdo."¹⁴ He speaks without a trace of the old cheerfulness, and there is no further evidence brought forth to suggest that he might have once been John, who, before coming to Canada, was, no doubt, someone else again. "I never did learn his real name; in his determination to become Canadian, he insisted that it was John."¹⁵

Consistent with the apparent construction of the minor characters, Arthur seems to operate in a manner which demonstrates the influence of his culture in the formation of his masculine subjectivity. It seems that much of his behaviour is part of an image constructed from fragments of popular culture, particularly those regarding the intrigues of politics and revolution. "It must've made him feel like a political refugee, which was probably one of his fantasies, though he never said so,"¹⁶ says Joan, referring to his furtive preference for living

¹³ Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 338

¹⁴ Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 280

¹⁵ Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 100

¹⁶ Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 20

out of a suitcase. Shortly after Joan meets him in London, part of Arthur's construction is seen to work by the imitation of an ideal figure, in this case Bertrand Russell. Joan makes note of the "awe-tinged admiration with which Arthur regarded him,"¹⁷ but is careful to qualify the object of idolatry as merely associated with Arthur's current phase. "I was less willing to simulate adoration of Arthur's hero-of-the-day: Arthur was fickle, he changed allegiances, and after I'd been through this a few times I became wary."¹⁸ What she becomes increasingly aware of is his tendency to shift from a role when it no longer suits the demands of his life. Many of the references to Arthur make clear what stage, or role, he is in at the moment. Setting the scene for the year 1968, for example, Joan explains that "it was Arthur's Quebec separatist incarnation."¹⁹ The shifts are accepted by Joan, they are even reliable enough to set a familiar pattern for her, characterized by frenetic activity at the outset of a new role, followed by disillusionment and torpor. "In quick succession he went through Vietnam and sheltering draft dodgers, student revolt, and an infatuation with Mao. Every one of these involved extensive reading, not just for Arthur but for me."²⁰ The next role would begin with the influence of a new thinker or idea. "'Here,' he would say, 'read this book,' and I'd know the cycle had begun again."²¹

Arthur's shifting roles indicate a constructed masculinity, and this masculinity seems to

¹⁷Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 167

¹⁸Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 167-168

¹⁹Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 209

²⁰Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 212

²¹Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 212

contribute to a repressive relationship with Joan. Each new role is a unified interpretation of dominant masculinity, and while each differs, there is a pattern of subtle abuse towards Joan. However, this power, expressed through such things as his pleasure in her various culinary failures, slowly gives way to a self-absorbed indifference to her, as his political projects come apart. It is only at this point that Joan abandons him for her affair with the Royal Porcupine, who is the dominating Gothic figure that Arthur no longer is. The danger of Gothic thinking, as earlier explained by Atwood, lies in trying to fit people into the roles which constitute it. Joan seems to be expecting Arthur to fill the dominant one. When he no longer does, her Gothic narrative lacks the proper male figure, and the Royal Porcupine takes over.

However, like Arthur, the Royal Porcupine also seems to move towards a non-dominant version of masculinity. Ostensibly appealing to Joan because of his participation in reckless, cape-clad masculinity, he is of course at the same time the very ordinary Chuck Brewer, freelance commercial artist. The multiple identity is nothing new to Joan, but as time goes by and he spends more time being the angst-ridden Chuck Brewer rather than the adventurous Royal Porcupine, she begins to lament his increasingly banal complexity. "I didn't want him to become gray and multidimensional and complicated like everyone else. Was every Heathcliff a Linton in disguise?"²² This initial movement towards multiplicity is reversed when he eliminates the side of himself that is the Royal Porcupine, opting for the decidedly non-Gothic masculinity of Chuck. Joan is horrified at this development, as he no longer participates in the discourse of dominating Gothic masculinity. She no longer finds him attractive, only threatening.

²² Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 271.

This is the central reversal of *Lady Oracle*. Previously, the "hero" of the narrative has always operated outside of the bounds of popular images of masculinity. Duncan and Joe did not play conventional male roles, at least not one at a time. In this novel, every male character from Arthur to her father participates in some form of traditional or idealized masculinity. The point, this time around, would not seem to be in avoiding the appropriation of such commercialized versions of masculinity, but in the use of them as a screen behind which there can be the possibility of alternate versions of subjectivity, outside of the dominant culture of commodified imagery. Joan's father seems to be the most adept at doing this, and is therefore most instrumental in her own escape from the gender relations of Gothic discourse.

While not the first major male character encountered in the book, Joan's father is the first to play a significant role in her life. He is away, fighting in the war, and returns shortly after the Dallodil Man incident. Accordingly, Joan is given to wondering if he is a bad or good man, and of course she finds that he cannot be reduced to either of these simple roles: "when the time came, a stranger walked through the door, kissed my mother and then me, and sat down at the table. He seemed very tired and said little. He brought nothing and did nothing, and that remained his pattern."²⁴

Having initially existed as "only a name," her father's return from the war does not seem to change his curious insubstantiality. "Most of the time he was simply an absence"²⁴ to Joan, until an event occurs which reveals that he has another identity. She witnesses the

²⁴ Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 66.

²⁵ Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, 66.

emotional outburst of a man who, having attempted suicide, has been revived by her father. "I thought all my father did was put people to sleep before operations. I didn't know about this resurrectionist side of his personality."²⁵ This role, which seems to endow her father with powers of life and creation, is shortly contrasted with another revelation about his identity. Overhearing a dinner conversation, Joan learns that her father acted as an undercover agent in France, and was personally responsible for killing men whose identities and allegiances were suspect: "he'd killed people and raised the dead."²⁶ ponders Joan, faced once again with a man who does not seem to be either good man or bad man, but both at the same time.

Her father's capacity for multiple roles is ultimately accepted by Joan, who decides that his identity is constituted by several positions, with no apparent underlying connection

no one ever understood his position [...] I don't think it was because he didn't have one. His position was the position of a man who has killed people and brought them back to life [...] Other than that his position was that of a man who wears maroon leather slippers and fiddles with the house plants on weekends, and for this reason is thought of as an inconsequential fool by his wife.²⁷

It is further implied that these positions are formed as a result of social expectations. "He was a man in a cage, like most men."²⁸ His freedom seems to arrive with the death of Joan's mother; at this point he makes a flagrant display of breaking the rules of her domestic order: "he'd made footmarks all over the rug, there were dirty dishes in the sink at least three days

²⁵ Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 70.

²⁶ Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 74.

²⁷ Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 138.

²⁸ Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 138.

old, he was systematically breaking all the rules."²⁹

He remains essentially mysterious to Joan, and his elusive identity is clearly not represented by the various positions he has occupied. During her final visit with him she is still noticing new sides: "his face had begun to emerge, his eyes were light blue and shrewd, I'd never thought of him as shrewd; and his mouth was thin, even a little reckless, the mouth of a gambler. Why had I never noticed?"³⁰ Having escaped from the pressures of Joan's mother, which worked to fit him into the positions noticed by Joan, he is free to emerge in new forms. He is relieved, "Despite his furrows and sighs he was smug, like a man who had gotten away with something."³¹

The father's escape from social pressures most resembles Joan's own escape from the limited roles of the Gothic narrative and patriarchal culture. In both cases, traditional and idealized gender roles act as the raw material of identity, but many such roles are employed simultaneously while preserving an essentially mysterious or diffuse core of self which cannot be reduced to an operation of patriarchal gender relations. Neither Joan nor her father attempts to work towards a unity of self, and in doing so, both manage to operate in a neutral space between the opposition of power and submission.

Like other male characters functioning in unified positions, Arthur appears to be reflecting a tremendous cultural pressure, which can be measured in his nocturnal distress. "Sometimes during these nights I would wake up to find Arthur clinging to me as if the bed

Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 179

Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 177

Atwood, *Lady Oracle* 179

was an ocean full of sharks and I was a big rubber raft. Asleep he was desperate, he sometimes talked to people who weren't there and ground his teeth."¹² Clearly the process of reproducing the subject positions necessary for the continuity of the social order is one which, at the individual level, must be a restrictive experience. Arthur, like Joan's father, is a "man in a cage, like most men." It is the nature of this cage which is considered in Atwood's next novel.

Chapter IV

The subject positions of patriarchy, as historically specific conditions which mold individual identity, are represented by the central figure of fossilization in *Life Before Man*. As before, multiplicity is developed as an alternative location within this patriarchal paradigm. This multiplicity is once again a problematic space; unlike the transformations allowed by the earlier novels, *Life Before Man* provides its characters with no escape. While the male characters, Nate in particular, are less associated with the restrictive power of patriarchy, they are more than ever limited to its repressive roles. Both male and female characters are depicted, with equal interest, as products of concrete historical moments. Each is trapped within a particular role, as surely as a fly in the amber of a long past time.

Life Before Man opens with a pair of epigraphs. The first speaks of fossils and the opportunity they provide in identifying the nature of long dead organisms. The fossil describes the shape of the creature, formed by mineral deposits pressing in on all sides. The once living tissue disintegrates and is replaced by the minerals of its environment. What is left is a shell filled with sediment, an empty shape. The structure of decay implicit in this process is described so as to suggest that violence may produce a better fossil: "definite identification is only possible where the animal had dropped dead in its tracks and become fossilized on the spot." The second epigraph contrasts this with an evocation of life that is formless and without bounds, the opposite of the fossil shape: "I look, I'm smiling at you, I'm

smiling in you, I'm smiling through you. How can I be dead if I breathe in every quiver of your hand?"

The novel presents us with three major characters who seem to be subjected to a form of this violent external pressure. Nate and Elizabeth are married, but only in outward form. Having lived through the death of their relationship, they struggle to free themselves of the marriage and the obligations they are still expected to fill. Nate wants to put together a new life, shared with Lesje, but he finds that there is a great deal of resistance to this change. There is pressure on him, that of expectations which demand that he play very specific roles, that his masculinity fit into the accepted formula of domination. Like a fossil, his shape is defined by this external force, and his internal life, if it hasn't disintegrated altogether in this violent process, must be elusive and quite unlike his social appearance.

Over the course of the book, Nate is fossilized, in the sense of the metaphor established by the epigraph. His definition cannot be free of social traces, of the external factor of his historical conditions. He feels no essential connection with these roles; they are simply a response to what is projected onto him. One role he plays is that of father, and it seems to be constructed in response to social expectations, as can be seen in an encounter with his daughter: "'What's for dinner?' she asks, adding 'Dad,' as if to remind him who he is."¹ By projecting "Dad" on him, she defines the shape of his external identity. But, like a fossil, it is only a shell.

Other roles are projected onto him, so that he shifts outward appearance depending on the nature of his differing relationships. In addition to being a father, he is also a son, as

¹Margaret Atwood, *Life Before Man* (Toronto: Seal, 1986), 9.

defined by the intense gaze of his mother's "bright blue eyes." They are "shining, earnest, always on the verge of some emotion he cannot quite face: disappointment, joy. The perpetual spotlight in which he's always lived, alone on the stage, the star performer."² Near the end of the book, as Nate's frustration nears its peak, his mother's definition of him takes the form of an oppressive ideal, a shape which he cannot conform to, and yet is forced into. "The weight of her ideal son presses on his chest, a plaster mannequin threatening to enter and choke him."³

This process entails a certain element of violence: we see it at work on Nate even in his first chapter. Because his sense of self is evidently composed of external expectations, he is powerless and ineffectual. "Nate wants to do something, perform something, smash his hand through the kitchen window. But on the other side of the glass there is a screen. That would neutralize him."⁴ Pressure, in the sense of being fit into a role, stays with Nate and builds in intensity as the plot progresses. "Nate thinks of himself as a lump of putty, helplessly molded by the relentless demands and flinty disapprovals of women he can't help being involved with."⁵ Indeed, it is in his relationships with women that Nate feels most confined, for it is here that a dominant discourse of masculinity demands the most of him. The male-female relationship in patriarchal society requires power and control for the male role, and this is reinforced on the individual level, both by the self-image of men, and the

Atwood, *Life Before Man* 118

Atwood, *Life Before Man* 263

³ Atwood, *Life Before Man* 9

Atwood, *Life Before Man* 33

expectations of women, whose subjectivity is also created within the patriarchal paradigm. Atwood has described female acceptance of the assumption of male power in a 1982 interview with Jo Brans. "I think the truth is that people expect men to be supermen. Even women—even feminists—take points off them when they aren't. They don't take equal points off women for having failings, because women are expected to have failings."⁶ This is certainly the case with Elizabeth, whose contempt for Nate is rooted in her assumption that he is completely free to act in any way that he may please. "It's his freedom she can't take. Free as a goddamned bird, while she's locked in this house, locked in this house while the roof leaks and the foundation crumbles and the earth revolves and the leaves fall from the calenders like snow."⁷ She sees no trap for Nate, and so despises his apparent weakness. What she expects of him is a decisive act, an expression of the power he is supposed to have. She has come to understand the suicide of her lover as such an expression. It was, of course, not an expression of control at all, but an act of desperation by a man who felt he was in a cage. Nevertheless, the dominant masculinity determines Elizabeth's expectations to the degree that she dismisses Nate for not living up to Chris' example: "he is free to get up and walk out at any time. She knows—who better?—that there is always that freedom, that exit. One way or another."⁸

Nate does not want to be a part of this masculinity of domination. He has given up a powerful and highly paid position in a legal firm, and has decided to engage himself in the

⁶Jo Brans, "Using What You're Given," *Margaret Atwood: Conversations*, 146.

⁷Atwood, *Life Before Man*, 229.

⁸Atwood, *Life Before Man*, 241.

physical activity of toymaking, but he cannot quite manage to escape from the conventional formula of masculinity. He is still "amputated" from any sense of self, disconnected from anything other than what he is expected to do. Atwood has described this as a condition of life for most men: "some guy who is doing nothing but punching holes in cards all day, he has no connection with himself at all, and guys who sit around on their asses in an office all day have no contact with their own bodies, and they are really deprived, they're functions, functions of a machine."⁹ Nate is expected to fill his position in this machine. Partaking of the dominant masculinity, this position must be one of social dominance, but as Roper and Tosh have pointed out in their introduction to *Manful Assertions*, it "may be subjectively experienced as oppression."¹⁰ Because Nate has tried to slip out of this role, his society, and the people within it, bear down on him from all angles, forcing him back into the acceptable masculine position, ultimately "recuperating" him.

Nate is not alone in this condition. The other male characters of the novel appear to have been placed in similarly stressful positions. Elizabeth's two encounters with the travelling lingerie salesman have a sordid tone which is set by his obvious desperation. "Sadness radiates from him like heat, she can see that now, it always has. When she leaves him he will probably cry."¹¹ He is powerless, his identity nothing more than a position from which he cannot escape. He plays his part for Elizabeth, trying to seduce her with stale manoeuvres, and when he fails, he blurts out an apology for his wretched act. "He withdraws

Gibson 28

Roper and Tosh 15

Atwood *Life Before Man* 210

his hand, looks up at her sadly. 'Do you think I'd do this,' he says, 'if I didn't have to'""¹²

Lesje's lover William is also depicted with this conspicuous vulnerability. He is bland and predictable, his masculinity not defined by the sort of power seen in the male characters of earlier novels. Instead, his attractiveness for her seems rooted in his lack of dominating behaviour. "She feels tender towards William when she considers his need for protection. He's never needed it before, but now she reflects upon the unconscious nape of his neck, the vulnerability of the hollow at the angle of his collarbone, his jugular veins."¹³ This vulnerability gives way when he senses that Lesje is slipping away from him. He responds by resorting to the traditional masculine role: he attempts to control her, in this case through the violent sexual exploitation of rape. While the incident is threatening and frightening to Lesje, it does not appear to change her estimation of his defencelessness. He still seems powerless to her. After his outburst, "Lesje is afraid he's going to cry."¹⁴ It is as though something has happened to William more than to Lesje, as if he is as much a victim as she. "It's the sight of William turning into someone else that has shocked her. She doesn't know whose fault it is."¹⁵ The sense is that something has acted upon him. The next day, William behaves as though nothing has happened: the inconsistency of this behaviour with the act of rape compounds Lesje's confusion over the source of this violence, so far removed from the William she thought she knew. "This behaviour of William's was more frightening than surliness or rage

¹² Atwood, *Life Before Man* 90

¹³ Atwood, *Life Before Man* 113

¹⁴ Atwood, *Life Before Man* 166

¹⁵ Atwood, *Life Before Man* 170

would have been. Had William forgotten all about the incident? Where had it come from, that burst of pure hate?"¹⁶ The answer, of course, lies in the culture which positions him. He saw no choice but to participate in the power-based masculinity demanded by the patriarchal paradigm, held up by cultural institutions as the only natural balance in the male-female relationship.

There is also Chris, the lover of Elizabeth, who has killed himself with a shotgun. Little of Chris is shown directly, but through Nate's recollections of him the same sense of helpless despair comes though. As Nate's own life gets further out of his control, he imagines he understands Chris' suicide. "In the past few weeks he's felt a growing kinship with Chris, with that fatal desperation."¹⁷ The act, like the rape by William, seems to be a reaction to pressure, an attempt to escape from some trap.

Life Before Man suggests that much of the recuperative influence operating on its male characters originates in the economic aspects of accepted masculinity. Nate expresses this basic concern when confronted with Elizabeth's dismissal of his concerns. "She acts as if he's gone to loll around on carpets of naked women, when the fact is he spends most of his life scrabbling for money."¹⁸ He has "stepped down" from a lucrative legal position in order to pursue an interest in hand-carved toys. This choice has resulted in a drastic reduction in earnings, which continue to drop steadily during the course of an economic recession. He has tried to step out of the traditional role of the high-earning male in favour of the decidedly

¹⁶ Atwood *Life Before Man* 177

¹⁷ Atwood, *Life Before Man* 236

¹⁸ Atwood, *Life Before Man* 237

un-manly world of toys. This transgression of established social structures rewards him with pressure to resume a "normative" position, specifically a productive and conventional male role, such as those expected of him by his mother, wife and children. In the end he does resume this position. His desperation for money drives him away from the unacceptable sphere of toymaking and back into the accepted one of legal control. He is even driven to seek the assistance of his former lover Martha in order to return to his former firm. With no other alternatives, he is helpless, and must ask humbly for the privilege of returning to what he once rejected.

His inability to earn translates into a non-male position in the patriarchal paradigm, which requires that he function as a provider in order to establish his masculinity. As a result, he cannot fully leave Elizabeth behind, and he feels no desire to distance himself from his children, all to the chagrin of Lesje. He feels that they need a proper father figure, and is willing to do whatever he must to fulfil this duty to them. "Who else would take care of them?" he asks himself, when he fantasizes about escape with Lesje. The fantasy includes an obligation to protect the family he is no longer part of: "on the shore, at a discreet distance and despite his best efforts, there's always another hut. He tries to shut it out but it too is indigenous. For the children, and, of course, for Elizabeth."¹²

This perceived obligation, in conjunction with economic concerns, seems to constitute Nate's crisis. As Barbara Ehrenreich points out in *The Hearts of Men*, it is a very real requirement for masculine acceptance. Increasingly contradictory in a shifting economic climate, it has been at the root of male discontent for several generations. In her analysis of

the shift in acceptable male roles a persistent rejection of the family obligation becomes apparent. At the beginning of this century, she argues, a male wage was based on the assumption that there was a family to support. This was reinforced by cultural images which operated to present the male provider as the only healthy role for a grown man. This naturally includes "punishment" for men who reject the role: conventional wisdom held that the adult bachelor was "queer," while extensive psychiatric theories were offered up to explain this sickness. "Dr. Paul Popenoe, whose suspenseful case studies entitled 'Can This Marriage Be Saved?' appeared regularly in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, blamed bachelorhood on 'emotional immaturity and infantile fixations.'"²⁰ The "breadwinner" role was simply equated with male maturity and full masculinity.

Subsequent movements to expand the boundaries of acceptable male behaviour have reacted against the breadwinner role. Men questioned the validity of a life spent working for the support of a woman, leading to various specific movements which endorsed liberation from marriage and the enjoyment of material self-indulgence. New consumer patterns developed, and the booming post-war American economy shifted to accommodate this new respect for excessive consumption. The bounds of acceptable male behaviour widened, and men were no longer limited to the breadwinner role. In fact, the conspicuous consumption of the individual was now held up as the healthy norm. "We moved [...] toward a moral climate that endorsed irresponsibility, self-indulgence and an isolationist detachment from the claims of others — and endorsed these as middle-class virtues and even as signs of 'health.'"²¹ These

Phemmelch *The Hearts of Men* 20

Phemmelch *The Hearts of Men* 169

new norms have helped rationalize a decrease in the male wage, which currently offers less than what is required to support dependents: "by 1976 only 40 percent of the jobs in the country paid enough to support a family."²² Thus, insists Ehrenreich, it is now considered normal for a man to support only himself; if one should think otherwise, he is not only transgressing a norm, the move is also discouraged by economic structures.

While these shifts effectively did away with marriage as a requirement for mature masculinity, what remained was the necessity for a position of dominance. Certainly Nate feels the contradiction between the role that he wishes to play and the socially determined roles that are available to him. He is expected to occupy a single, unified position and lead what he might call "an honest life," but attending to the differing demands on him have left him suspended: "he wanted his life to be honest, and all he has now is the taste of sawdust in his mouth."²³ He is torn between providing for family obligations and his desire to escape to a new space with Lesje, and he experiences this duality under the full weight of cultural and economic censure. "Nate knows he can't keep up his divided life much longer"²⁴ and later: "He should have two sets of clothes, two identities, one for each house: it's the lack of this extra body or costume that is cracking him apart. He knew in advance, in theory, that separation is painful; he did not know it would also be literal. He has been separated: he is separate."²⁵ The divergent demands on Nate produce exterior roles which stretch him in

Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, 173.

Atwood, *Life Before Man*, 222.

²⁴Atwood, *Life Before Man*, 139.

Atwood, *Life Before Man*, 223.

different directions. He feels no internal or essential connection with these coerced identities: he feels that the true core of his self is a weakened, insubstantial shadow. He considers this in terms of Lesje: that he has made her what she is by projecting it on her. Realizing this, he fears that she may detect whatever self there is underlying her image of him: "she glimmers like a thin white moon for him alone. By seeing how beautiful she is he's made her beautiful, but what if she discovers the truth? What he suspects is the truth. That he's patchwork, a tin man, his heart stuffed with sawdust."²¹ Nate is a fossil. Whatever outer shape he takes is formed by the pressure of his environment: what is inside is nothing but sand.

Chapter V

She's afraid of men and it's simple, it's rational, she's afraid of men because men are frightening. She's seen the man with the rope, now she knows what he looks like. She has been turned inside out, there's no longer a *here* and a *there*. Rennie understands for the first time that this is not necessarily a place she will get out of, ever. She is not exempt. Nobody is exempt, from anything.¹

While the focus of *Life Before Man* rests on the powerless position of individual men, the male characters of *Bodily Harm* are once again closely connected with the power of traditional patriarchy. The coercive aspect of male subjectivity is set aside in order to present the threat of violent domination expressed through the position it generates. Individual male characters are represented as necessarily complicit, through the roles in which they participate, with an order in which brutality is the norm, victimizing anyone, both male and female, who happens to be in a submissive "female" position.

On the opening pages, Rennie, who has just undergone surgery for breast cancer, discovers that a man has broken into her house and left a rope on her bed. The violation works on several levels, not the least of which is the clear expression of control. The identity of this man is an enigma, and he becomes an emblem for the abstracted agents of the male violence which limit her to a victim position throughout the novel, beginning with the two policemen who question her about the incident. These men are relaxed and amused as they casually draw conclusions about Rennie's lifestyle. The woman before them finds herself

¹ Margaret Atwood, *Bodily Harm* (Toronto: Seal, 1982), 296.

helpless in the face of a sexual predator: this is normal to them. "He smiled down at me, watching my face, almost delighted, like an adult who's just said *I told you so* to some rash child with a skinned knee"² The attitude described by Rennie reflects the prevailing acceptance of gender inequality. It's hard to tell who is more threatening to her, these policemen, or the intruder. Both have a power which necessarily renders her weak. The police move around her apartment with as much affront as the intruder. "The big one opened the closet door, casually, as if he had every right."³ While these men are known, the intruder is a mystery. His identity suggests a specific source of male violence, providing a problem which the plot moves to solve. The novel is a thriller, a story full of action and intrigue, and men doing dangerous things. However, it is told from the point of view of Rennie and others, both men and women, who are victimized by the actions of these men. Dr. Fish, for example, may be considered to occupy a female position in relation to the patriarchal norms. He does not display the aggressive masculinity of other male characters: he is ultimately assassinated, a victim of the excessive power that he refused to wield. His masculinity, which does not expressly support the existing social order, is transgressive.

Rennie proceeds through involvement with three male characters in this narrative. The first of these is Jake, the man she is living with until shortly after her operation. He fully suggests the exploitative power of the conventional male position introduced by the epigraph from John F.urger preceding the text: "A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman's presence...defines what can and cannot be done to

Atwood, *Godly Farm*, 14

Atwood, *Godly Farm*, 14

her." Jake is an advertising packager by profession, actively manipulating the appearance of objects in order to achieve a desired effect: "He decided how things would look and what contexts they would be placed in, which meant what people would feel about them."³ He is concerned with the externals only, how things appear to a hypothetical observer, which, in Rennie's case, is himself. She is just another project for him, another object to be remade in a manner more desirable to a male consumer. "Take a chance," said Jake, during one of his campaigns to alter her, what was it this time? Purple satin with rhinestone spaghetti straps. Make a statement."⁴ He presents her with lingerie to reveal more of her body to his eyes, all the while trying to make her fit the image that he has decided is appropriate for her. "Two of her nightgowns, the black one with the see-through lace top and the red satin one slit up the sides, had been presents from Jake....The real you, he'd say, with irony and hope."⁵

Yet, while Jake is an active source of male dominance, it is, nevertheless, made clear that his subjectivity is an inscription of the historical moment of his society. As a result, he assumes the male norm of excessive power. His violent fantasies place him in the role of rapist or intruder, and always grant him a position of dominance. "Sometimes he would climb up the fire escape and in through the window instead of coming through the door, he'd send her ungrammatical and obscene letters composed of words snipped from newspapers purporting to be from crazy men, he'd hide in closets and spring out at her, pretending to be a

³Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 103.

⁴Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 15.

⁵Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 20.

lurker."⁷ Every passage describing Jake's sexual fantasies involves him playing such a role: presumably he is unable to imagine any other sexual position for himself. It is normative to him, and, significantly, to Rennie as well. "Apart from the first shock, none of these things had ever alarmed her," she adds. The acceptance of such a definition of "normal" reflects the extent to which the power inequality and violence of the patriarchal order is established.

But there is more to Jake's behaviour than simple reflection. When he has sex with her and indulges in his rapist fantasies, male violence is no longer something that exists as an abstracted background. It exists there in the bed, where Jake's fantasies have very real results. Rennie is demeaned by his attitude, offered no choice but submission, and is sometimes even hurt. "Jake liked to pin her hands down, he liked to hold her so she couldn't move. He liked that, he liked thinking of sex as something he could win at. Sometimes he really hurt her, once he put his arm across her throat and she really did stop breathing."⁸ He explains that he would never do any such thing in a real context, but there is nothing to differentiate his fantasy role and the reality of what he is doing to her.

Rennie leaves Jake, when it becomes clear that he cannot accept the condition in which breast cancer has left her. She no longer plays the passive part in his sexual domination. "Fight me for it, he said. Tell me you want it. This was his ritual, one of them, it had been hers too and now she could no longer perform it."⁹ When she is unable to put up a struggle, his own role loses its power. His sexual pleasure is too dependent on her defeat.

⁷ Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 27.

⁸ Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 2.

⁹ Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 200.

Rennie's friend Jocasta recognizes this in her experience of the male reaction to the increase in sexual permissiveness since the 1960's: "they still want sex, but only if they can *take* it. Only if you've got something to lose, only if you struggle a little."¹⁰

Rennie has been rendered powerless, both by her brush with cancer and the constant threat of physical violence as foregrounded by the intruder. Her relationship with Jake, as an extension of this, is the condition she must move away from, just as Marian moves away from Peter in *The Edible Woman*. Jake and Peter are similar, as they both function as straightforward agents of the social restriction which threatens a female narrator. However, Rennie is much like Joan Foster of *Lady Oracle*, who is uncertain of any alternative position for herself within the male-female relationship. Joan is unable to relate to men without the power of the Gothic discourse; similarly, Rennie looks to Daniel, her doctor, to save her from harm. She asks for him to exert power over her, and while the power she seeks differs from that offered by Jake, questions about the nature and effect of such "healing" power are raised.

Rennie falls in love with Daniel because of what he represents to her, not because of who he is. She has little more than a vague sense of his identity as an individual man. "It was inappropriate to have fallen in love with Daniel, who had no distinguishing features that Rennie could see. She hardly even knew what he looked like, since, during the examinations before the operation, she hadn't bothered to look at him."¹¹ A closer examination shows him in an unflattering light: "He wasn't even that handsome, now that she had a good look. His proportions were wrong, he was too tall for his shoulders, his hair was too short, his arms

¹⁰ Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 167.

¹¹ Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 33.

were too long, he gangled."¹² Despite this, Rennie remains obsessed by him, because he fits into the role she expects from a relationship with a man. As a man he has power, like Jake, but Daniel has used his power to save her from cancer, and now she wants this power to envelop her. "I want you to save my life, thought Rennie. You've done it once, you can do it again."¹³

Daniel does not fit into her needs. He seems reluctant to play the part of her saviour in any manner other than being her physician. "It would be unethical, he said. I'd be taking advantage of you. You're in an emotional state."¹⁴ He seems careful to avoid taking advantage of her in any way. If there is any power in his relationship with her, he does not feel it. "I know I can't offer you much,"¹⁵ he says, apologetically, and later: "That's the way I am, said Daniel. There are some things I just can't do."¹⁶ He does not dominate her in any way; indeed he seems to have little power over his own life. Like Nate, in *Life Before Man*, Daniel is sensitive, caring, concerned about a truly equal relationship, and utterly bound by the position he finds himself in. He is not free to pursue his interest in Rennie: "It's not that I don't want to, he said, you know that. * His face for a moment was like a child's looking up, he was so sweet it hurt, and Rennie felt brutal. He had no right to appeal to her like that, to throw himself on her mercy."¹⁷ Rennie responds negatively to this reversal of power roles. Daniel is

Atwood, *Bodily Harm* 34

Atwood, *Bodily Harm* 144

*Atwood, *Bodily Harm* 143

Atwood, *Bodily Harm* 198

Atwood, *Bodily Harm* 196

Atwood, *Bodily Harm* 196

not being strong, and she resents his failing, just as Elizabeth found Nate's hesitations contemptible. Both women expect these men to be "masculine," to be in power.

Significantly, their relationship ultimately snaps into conformity with the demands of the patriarchal paradigm. Rennie telephones him and pretends to have taken an overdose "She wanted Daniel to hold her hand, pat her on the back, comfort her, be with her. That was what he was good at. She had given up expecting anything else. She got dressed, made the bed, brushed her teeth and hair, being a good child at least to this extent. When Daniel came over he would give her a gold star."¹⁸ Daniel the rescuer comes to the aid of the woman child in danger, and they make love. There is, however, an air of resentment surrounding the event. When Daniel comes to her house, he tells her not to do this again. Afterwards, Daniel is described as having responded to his needs as much as, perhaps more, than hers. "The fact was that he had needed something from her, which she could neither believe nor forgive. She'd been counting on him not to; she was supposed to be the needy one, but it was the other way around."¹⁹ The incident "recuperates" both of them into a patriarchal relationship, but there is also recognition of Daniel's "un-masculine" weakness. He does not fit into Rennie's expectations of him, as he does not fit into the dominant masculinity. In fact, he seems to fit nowhere. Instead, he is detached and isolated from the demands of the culture which would position him as the rescuer he does not feel he is. "Daniel moves through the day enclosed in a glass bubble, like an astronaut on the moon, like a rare plant in a hothouse

Atwood, *Bodily Harm* 237-238

¹⁹Atwood, *Bodily Harm* 238

a fluke. Inside the bubble his life is possible. Normal. Outside, what would become of him?"²⁰ What may become of him seems to be described in what happens between he and Rennie. Like Joan Foster's father, Daniel seems to shield himself from a demanding world, hiding behind a face of the conventional masculinity expected of him. He is the figure of banality to Rennie, who imagines his life as a cliché of the domesticated breadwinner:

She thought about him waking up in the morning, rolling over, turning off the alarm clock, making love with his pregnant wife, whose face Rennie did not picture, carefully and with consideration but somewhat quickly, because it was morning and he had other things to do. His wife didn't come but they're both used to that, they love each other anyway. She'll come later, some other day, when Daniel has more time.²¹

This representation of his life is repeatedly associated with normality, in opposition to what she had come to accept as normal about Jake. This opposition dismantles the masculine norms reflected in Jake's domination of her, but does not lend any veracity to the masculinity she attributes to Daniel. Its artificiality is indicated in her acknowledgement that her obsession is rooted in the discourse of romance literature and day-time television:

doctors were functionaries, they were what your mother hoped you would marry, they were fifties, they were passé. It wasn't only inappropriate, it was ridiculous. It was expected. Falling in love with your doctor was something middle-aged women did, women in the soaps, women in nurse novels and in sex-and-scalpel epics with titles like *Surgery* and nurses with big tits and doctors who looked like Dr. Kildare on the cover.²²

Such masculinity provides little real alternative to that which is represented by Jake, as both

Atwood, *Bodily Harm* 284

Atwood, *Bodily Harm* 237

Atwood, *Bodily Harm* 33

are constructed with assumptions of patriarchal gender relations. Daniel's actual masculinity, that of concern, equality and need, would be closer to an alternative, but it is not acceptable, as it is, to her demands, which are developed within a patriarchal ideology.

Daniel is something of a mystery to Rennie, ("He was a good man, a mystery. Rennie wanted to know why.")²¹ and so he operates to draw her further along the plot line. Paul is also a mystery to Rennie, and as such he plays a similar role in her narrative, propelling the trajectory of her character. Unlike Daniel, however, Paul's construction is more threatening. There is never any doubt about the amount of control he exerts over her, and many passages impart a sinister tone to his domination. A photograph in Paul's apartment provides an emblem of his treatment of Rennie, and presumably of all women. It shows: "a brown-skinned woman wound up in a piece of material that held her arms to her sides but left her breasts and thighs and buttocks exposed. She had no expression on her face, she was just standing there, if anything a little bored. The picture was called *Enigma*."²² The woman shown is powerless and passive to the visual scrutiny of a male observer, an object of speculation, to be possessed or discarded, and certainly to be known without owning the power of knowing herself.

Again, Rennie knows Paul only by associating him with a recognizable form of masculinity. While Daniel moves within a banal, suburban discourse, Paul occupies a more exotic role. He is a secret agent, his loyalties a mystery, his relationship to her potentially hostile or protective. This is as much of a cliché of male identity as Daniel's dashing doctor

²¹ Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 197.

²² Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 105.

part, just as artificial, derived from suspense novels rather than day-time television. It is also a position of power, whether threatening or benevolent: in either case Rennie's fate rests in his hands. The similarity is reinforced by Rennie's limited ability to consider alternative masculinities. Because Paul's identity continues to elude her, she imagines other possibilities, and once again what she comes up with is the familiarly domestic masculinity: "Rennie suddenly finds this very suburban. All he needs are some striped pyjamas and a heart attack and the picture will be complete. He's not the one who's giving that impression though."²⁵

Unlike Daniel, Paul accepts his domination of Rennie, of many other women, and even men. This masculinity is completely in line with the dominant one, and it is apparent that this is exactly what Rennie has been looking for. When she sees old Elva attend to the injured foot of a German tourist, she acknowledges the need for such painful but regenerative care.

"Rennie, watching, wants to hold out her own foot, even though there's nothing wrong with it, even though it will hurt. She wants to know what it feels like, she wants to put herself into the care of those magic hands. She wants to be cured, miraculously, of everything, of anything at all."²⁶ That night, when she and Paul make love, the passage is juxtaposed with one describing the failure of her relationship with Jake. While Jake cannot accept her after the operation, cannot touch her, Paul does not look away from her scar. He touches her, and makes everything better:

He reaches out his hands and Rennie can't remember ever having been touched before. Nobody lives forever, who said you could? This much will have to do, this much is

Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 248

Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 191

enough. She's open now, she's been opened, she's being drawn back down. She enters her body again and there's a moment of pain, incarnation, this may be only the body's desperation, a flareup, a last clutch at the world before the long slide into final illness and death; but meanwhile she's solid after all, she's still here on the earth, she's grateful, he's touching her, she can still be touched."²⁷

This solution does not seem to last. Ultimately, Paul remains insubstantial to her, except in a very basic, physical sense. Like other male characters, he does not reveal his dreams to her, instead suggesting that he does not have them, or at least does not recall them. The one dream he does describe to her only reinforces the lack of substance to his identity. "I dream about a hole in the ground,"²⁸ he says, describing what could be seen as a grave. It is a disturbing image, at one level suitably evocative of the violence he is connected with. It is also evocative of emptiness and absence, like the pit that was so favoured by Duncan of *The Edible Woman*. At the root of his being, in the dreams behind his strange and shifting face there is nothing but a blank space. Lora seems to confirm this: "there was something missing in him, it was like being with someone who wasn't there, you know?"²⁹ The authenticity of his masculinity leaves Rennie with a connection to his physical being only: "She reaches out to him and he's tangible, he doesn't go away,"³⁰ she notes, with a suggestion of surprise that he is not a ghost of some sort.

Bodily Harm is consistent with Atwood's other novels in portraying male characters whose only substance is constituted by participation in, or reaction against, the established

²⁷ Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 204.

²⁸ Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 248.

²⁹ Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 255.

³⁰ Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 251.

masculine norms. Particular emphasis is placed on the manner in which these norms contribute to the perpetuation of a system which routinely brutalizes those who have no power. Paul's power may have appealed to Rennie, may have put her in touch with her own body again, but it also is responsible for leaving her and Lora in a prison cell from which they do not seem to escape.

Despite the obvious artificiality of Paul's masculine identity, there is a clear connection between him and the man who leaves the rope on Rennie's bed at the opening of the novel. When Rennie tries to imagine the identity of this man, she considers the possibility that it is an isolated incident which serves as a focal point for the fear brought on by her cancer: "You're projecting onto some pathetic weirdo who's never going to bother you again. That scratching you heard at the window last night wasn't coming from the outside at all."¹¹ She resists essentializing the incident and considering the intruder as somehow a part of herself. She sees that male violence is not an abstract thing, not something that exists somewhere else, but right here. She reminds herself, "the man existed," realizing that someone is responsible. "At the end of the rope there was someone. Everyone had a face, there was no such thing as a faceless stranger."¹²

Paul's association with this phrase links him to the rope man. The rope man is an act without a face, while Paul is a face, several of them perhaps, without any clear act. All that is certain is that he is threatening, as when he drives the jeep too fast, wearing his reflective sunglasses, erasing his eyes. "Without his eyes his face is expressionless, he's a faceless

¹¹ Atwood, *Reddy Farm*, 40-41.

¹² Atwood, *Reddy Farm*, 41.

stranger."³³ His power over her connects him with a masculine role generated by patriarchal society. The role and the society are interdependent, the misery of repression becomes a reality because Paul is the agent of it. "Don't blame it on me, Paul says, with a little shrug. 'I didn't invent it.'"³⁴ He may not have, but his masculinity is the expression of it. Thus he is not exempt from responsibility for what happens to her, both at the beginning of the book and the end, where she and Lora wait hopelessly. "Nobody is exempt from anything."³⁵ It is clear that the rope man was someone like Paul, an ordinary man, with a face, a name. For Paul is not a faceless stranger: he has a face, a role, a place in the net of violence which entangles the women of *Bodily Harm*.

³³ Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 169.

³⁴ Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 149.

³⁵ Atwood, *Bodily Harm*, 209.

Chapter VI

"there was little that was truly original with or indigenous to Gilead: its genius was synthesis,"¹ writes Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, with academic admiration, in the Historical Notes to the artifact that has come to be known as *The Handmaid's Tale*. It is true enough that the origin of Gilead lies in the conditions of our present society, as do the means for understanding the role of men within it. In fact there is nothing that is original with or indigenous to Gileadean masculinity. The male roles are dictated not by nature, but through the synthesis of what is required by the structures of society. *The Handmaid's Tale* is fundamentally concerned with the shifting nature of these structures, and the resulting changes in what are accepted as normative gender roles.

The dislocation of men described by Atwood, in her interviews, is associated with pre-Gileadean society by two major characters: "there's something missing in them, even the nice ones. It's like they're permanently absent-minded, like they can't quite remember who they are. They look at the sky too much. They lose touch with their feet."² This description of men just prior to the coup is provided by the narrator's reconstruction of her mother and her opinions, and bears more than passing resemblance to statements made by the Commander:

¹ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Toronto: Seal, 1985), 284.

² Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 13.

"The main problem was with the men," he says, explaining the world before Gilead. "There was nothing for them any more. [...] There was nothing to work for," he elaborates, "nothing to fight for. We have the stats from that time. You know what they were complaining about the most? Inability to feel."³ The narrator's mother and the Commander are completely divergent characters, the former being an outspoken feminist and the latter a fundamentalist misogynist, and yet both converge on a point which is central to this book, as before: that masculine identity is composed of what is dictated by the structures of society.

This is set out in the playful exchanges between Luke, the narrator's pre-Gilead husband, and her mother. "He said men needed more meat than women did, and that it wasn't a superstition and he wasn't being a jerk, studies had been done. There are some differences."⁴ Luke's teasing use of this biological grounding of masculinity anticipates what the Commander later cites as "a state policy justified as being a reflection of a natural order: 'Nature demands variety, for men. It stands to reason, it's part of the procreational strategy. It's Nature's plan.'"⁵ The mother rejects any naturalized definition of masculine identity, and responds to Luke by pointing out the degree to which his identity is dependent upon shifting social norms. When Luke suggests that cooking is his hobby (and not some indication of social progress), she replies, "Once upon a time you wouldn't have been allowed to have such a hobby, they'd have called you queer."⁶ In the context of Gilead, the mother's meaning is

³ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 199, 198.

⁴ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 89.

⁵ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 122.

⁶ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 105.

especially clear that masculinity is a changing role, determined by the sanction of cultural conventions, represented here by the ubiquitous "they." When historical conditions change, sweeping in new forms of social organization, the cultural definitions of what is "naturally" masculine shift accordingly.

When the structure of society does change, and Gilead is created, Luke does not seem to mind, initially. The narrator is sent home from her job and discovers that her money has been transferred to Luke's account, and he responds with a tenderness which suggests that he is oblivious to what has been done to her. He wants her to make love that night, as if things were normal, but she is numb. "He doesn't mind this, I thought. He doesn't mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other's, any more. Instead, I am his." To a degree, things are normal for him even at this point. This early policy of Gilead is only an extension of existing power relations between men and women, where men are granted the hierarchical privilege. Women, relegated to positions of submission, are commodities for the possession of men in very real legal and ideological ways. The conventional definitions of masculinity dominating our culture demand a great deal of male power over women, meeting such requirements is simply not possible for the majority of individual men in our society, who, as Ehrenreich argues, control very little of their own lives. Indeed, it is implied that these changes would be welcomed by the men described as "permanently absent-minded" by her mother and "unable to feel" by the Commander. The statements of both of these characters suggest, in addition to the social construction of masculinity, that there is some sort of problem developing just prior to the creation of Gilead's cultural order. Something is amiss.

with the men, they are somehow at a loss for concrete behaviour. There is not enough textual evidence to indicate what this may be attributed to, and obviously the mother and the Commander would cite very different factors. Nevertheless, what remains clear, and very significant, is that both present the problem as structural in nature. Both work to suggest that the condition of individual men is the result of shifting social norms perpetuated by specific patterns of social organization.

The novel tells the story of the Commander's structural solution, rather than the mother's vision of feminist society. Gilead's composition differs greatly from the previous society, but the mechanism of social control operates in much the same way, albeit to a lesser degree. Men and women are given new social positions as functions of the state; this order is rationalized by a handful of dubiously connected scientific ideas (just as Darwinism continues to be misused as a natural justification for *laissez faire* economics) and enforced through an ever-present hierarchy, which in this case is military in nature. The result is a masculine identity which is entirely legislated by forces external to the individual. Male characters throughout the book operate within the bounds of rigid structural slots. The narrator's doctor, for example, is free to move only within the space provided by him, which is textually represented by the sheet of paper hung suspended between them in order to prevent eye contact. However, this doctor apparently dares to move beyond the parameters dictated to him. He affects a friendly familiarity towards the narrator, a posture that is sufficiently unorthodox to make her take note: "He isn't supposed to speak to me except when it's absolutely necessary. But this doctor is talkative." The casual tone of this observation gives

way to more profound shock when he suggests that he could "help her" get pregnant and subsequently receive the elevation of status she is required to want. This is a serious violation of both their official roles. And yet, as it turns out, the practice is very common, often being accepted or even arranged by the Wives, who also require this form of affirmation of their feminine roles. Thus, while apparently stepping outside of his accepted role, the doctor is merely sidestepping into a less official (but equally common) structurally-determined role. As he makes this proposal to the narrator, he lifts the sheet separating them and looks at her. This might have represented a transgression if he had revealed a simple face, bare of any markings of his official position or state function. But what she sees is only half a face. "The lower part of his face is covered by the white gauze mask, regulation."⁹ Regulation still identifies him. Unofficial, but still necessary to the Gileadean social structure, his function as state stud defines his masculinity. The doctor remains in a position of great power over her: regardless of how she reacts to his offer, she is helpless. She is risking her life if she accepts his offer, as he may be an Eye, or he may decide to report her on a whim. He may report her even if she does not accept, or he can change his report in order to have her declared an Unwoman. No matter what she chooses to do, she is submitting to his power. The relationship between the two is a reflection of the order which maintains the state: as long as the dynamic is defined by a dominant and a submissive role, patriarchal relations are preserved, and Gilead continues. The reproduction of the society hinges on the conventional nature of the doctor's masculinity, which is, after all, far from transgressive.

This masculinity is discursively constructed, and so most male characters are depicted

in a manner which demonstrates that their roles are no more essential than the uniforms they must wear. Even the Commander's considerable power seems to come from his uniform, as a symbol of his state position. "Without his uniform he looks smaller, older, like something being dried,"¹⁰ thinks the narrator, upon seeing him fully naked for the first time. The state position itself can be seen as representative of an approval of the male's public worth. This social source of male positioning is apparent in a group of naked men, who, while bearing no physical insignia of difference, appear to display themselves to the approval of others, who are representatives of the conventional state order. "I marvel again at the nakedness of men's lives: the showers right out in the open, the body exposed for inspection and comparison, the public display of privates. What is it for? What purposes of reassurance does it serve? The flashing of a badge, look, everyone, all is in order, I belong here."¹¹

While at a checkpoint, the narrator makes note of the contradiction between the threat of a Guardian's armoured position and the softness of his face. "His skin is pale and looks unwholesomely tender, like the skin under a scab"¹². The scab image is evocative of the violent nature of the pressure used to confine these men to their positions: a subsequent passage makes this violence literal, then describes a more subtle coercion. "If they think of a kiss, they must then think immediately of the floodlights going on, the rifle shots. They think instead of doing their duty and of promotion to the Angels, and of being allowed possibly to marry, and then, if they are able to gain enough power and live to be old enough, of being

¹⁰ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 739.

¹¹ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 68.

¹² Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 23.

allotted a Handmaid of their own."¹² It is this incentive-based enforcement of male behaviour which operates most like the process of social positioning in our current society. These men, like men today, limit themselves to conventional and unified identities which function to preserve the existing social order. In exchange, they are offered the promise of a slightly better role for themselves, although still well within acceptable and conservative parameters.

Of course, the Guardians are not alone in participating in roles which preserve the order of Gilead. As the doctor's function seems to suggest, even this rigid system generates contradictory elements of male identity beneath the unified facade of official masculinity. The Commander, for example, exhibits a great deal of this. His first appearance, during a solemn household ritual, is characterized by the narrator's shifting perceptions of him. Initially, he "looks like a museum guard," but in the space of a single paragraph he also appears to be "like a midwestern bank president" and "like a vodka ad."¹³ Finally "he looks like a shoemaker in an old fairytale book. Is there no end to his disguises, of benevolence?" she wonders.¹⁴ This initial encounter with the Commander seems to suggest that he is composed from images which are cultural fragments of pre-Gilead masculinity. While there is no evidence to suggest that these masculine references are intended by the Commander, a later passage shows him actively composing his appearance on the model of a pre-Gilead image. As the narrator enters his private room for the first time she notes that he is standing with one arm on the mantel, the other hand in his pocket: a casual stance, meant to impress.

Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 20, 22.

Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 82.

Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 83.

"It's such a studied pose, something of the country squire, some old come-on from a glossy men's mag. He probably decided ahead of time that he'd be standing like that when I came in."¹⁹ What this must suggest is, again, the artificiality of apparently natural masculinity displayed by himself and the country squire long before him. His participation in what must surely be transgressive masculine images is consistent with the other covert activity which renders his life multiple. He is both the puritanical patriarch and the after-hours playboy. The roles are contradictory, of course, and yet it appears to be the accepted norm with the elite class of Gilead, as recognized by the institution of Jezebel's.

Nick also is multiple. He is the official chauffeur, but in addition to this he acts as assistant to the secret activity of both the Commander and his wife, Serena Joy. His complicity with Serena Joy's covert impregnation plan fits him into what must be a common and necessary role in a society where the conventional reproductive process no longer works. Like the doctor, he operates as a state stud, and despite the unconventional appearance of this role, its function of propping up the social order of Gilead renders it a conservative role. Nick is also complicit with the Commander's excursions to Jezebel's, which can also be considered, due to widespread acceptance, and hints of the need to facilitate foreign relations and trade, to be a part of the social order. Even while he is acting in these positions, he is a member of the secret police, and at the same time, active in the subversive Mayday underground. Thus he helps the Commander and his wife deceive one another, acts as the state's monitor of these activities, and works to dismantle the state, all at the same time.

Ultimately Nick's multiplicity functions in a manner which differs from that of the

¹⁹ Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, 129.

Commander. The masculinity of the Commander, while apparently transgressive, is actually conventional, operating as it does to preserve the structures of Gilead, and maintaining the hierarchical power arrangements underlying it. The same can be said of the doctor. Nick also fits into such conservative roles, but in addition he operates in a way which is genuinely subversive of the institutions of Gilead. Thus he is able to transgress the Gileadean society's function in positioning him in a role which would preserve the society. Specifically, his alternative masculinity is one which does not reproduce the gender relations of Gilead. Generally, the question of whether it is possible to transgress the whole process of dominant subject positioning does not seem to be explored in this text, as it is in earlier works, such as *The Edible Woman* and *Surfacing*. Rather, it seems to suggest simply that the nature of the roles provided by a culture's prescribed masculinity are by nature conservative, and so any alternative roles are necessarily subversive of the existing order. This is achieved within the context of an examination of the structural roots of accepted masculine identity where the forces which position men are clearly identified. *The Handmaid's Tale* continues the approach to masculinity employed throughout Atwood's prose writing: it emphasizes the powerless condition of individual men who occupy the roles which constitute the machinery of power, and reveals the lack of any masculine position beyond this machine.

Conclusion

Clearly, Atwood presents gender as a central category of organization and hierarchy in the social sphere. It has long been acknowledged that her work depicts female characters who struggle to free themselves from the limited feminine space allowed by a patriarchal society. In the light of recent work on masculinity theory, it can now be seen that Atwood's prose writing has consistently constructed male characters who are similarly restricted by the social order of patriarchy. Each novel provides a context of cultural norms, both masculine and feminine, which define the possibilities for individual identity and behaviour. The resulting depiction reveals a narrow range of acceptable roles for both men and women. Atwood has shown that characters who operate in transgression of these boundaries must withstand the pressure of social forces which work to restore such individuals to acceptable positions.

In addition, it seems clear that Atwood's presentation of gender stresses the conservative nature of the conventional roles within it. The dislocation of identity experienced by her male characters suggests how the reproduction of the social order is achieved at the level of the individual, where the acceptable subject position is that which preserves the order at the expense of the individual. It is in this sense that Atwood describes society as a machine, one which either incorporates an individual into its function or runs them over.

The social forces which position men and women in relation to this machine are generated by the culture which accompanies economic structures existing at any particular

historical moment. This cultural apparatus shifts according to the ideological needs of the current social organization, determining the range of acceptable subject positions within the society, and producing a population of individuals who will uphold it. Hence, as Barbara Ehrenreich suggests in *The Hearts of Men*, the limits of 20th century consumer capitalism, which cannot support the labour costs of both men *and* women in any equal manner, contribute to a patriarchal order which avoids any recognition of the needs of the female population by fitting men and women into a hierarchical relationship, naturalizing a position of domination for men, and submission for women. The parameters of acceptable gender behaviour consequently include only those attributes which contribute to the perpetuation of this order: powerful, competitive men and domesticated, passive women.

Atwood's depiction of masculinity exposes the cultural source of its parameters, while suggesting the shifting nature of this cultural apparatus. Her male characters are firmly embedded within her reconstruction of patriarchy: they operate either from within the parameters of the dominant masculinity, or from without, in the poorly defined space of alternative masculinity. This position is vague and contradictory, as there is no recognition of it within our culture. In either case her male characters work to reveal the boundaries of the masculinity simultaneously produced by, and reproducing, the machinery of our hierarchical society.

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