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**THE FEMME FATALE:
THEORISING FEMALE POWER AND
SUBJECTIVITY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S
ALIAS GRACE AND *THE ROBBER BRIDE***

by

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Introduction

The *femme fatale* has become a familiar mode of femininity setting up, like all generic formulations, a regime of exclusion, classification, normalisation and definition of boundaries. Ambiguous and indeterminate, the *femme fatale* is a stereotype of femininity that is repeatedly created, fixated upon and turned into a spectacle of 'otherness'; the stereotype functions to signpost bodies that are mapped and 'known', aestheticised, pathologised and panopticed. Although formally created in late-nineteenth century modernism, the *femme fatale* retains her mythic connotations and rears her ugly, snake-haired head every time 'monstrous' feminine power is imagined. Figures of monstrous femininity have been taken up in women's postmodern writing to theorise female subjectivity and agency and to interrogate the fetishising and abjecting of female bodies throughout history (Curti). The 'beautiful and monstrous' *femme fatale* points towards the subversive strategy of contemporary postmodern, poststructuralist and (post)-feminist (re)appropriations of a cult of deathly and beautiful femininity. In Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) and *The Robber Bride* (1993), it is the *femme fatale*, a mythic, feminine creature arising from late-Victorian and modernist imaginings of femininity, who is deployed to counter the fixity of both gender and power.

Lynda Hart opens her book *Fatal Women* with a quote from Foucault: "Criminals come in handy" (ix), and the female criminal is indeed supremely 'handy'. As a criminal subject, the *femme fatale* can be viewed through the lens of power/knowledge exacted upon and extracted from the body of the transgressive woman. Foucault delineates the Victorian age as a time when "the legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law," and what slipped out of the heterosexual, conjugal bed was vulnerable to emerging legal and medical forces affixed to proper, contained, bourgeois subjectivities (*History* 292). As a body whose sexuality is

'queer', active and non-reproductive/conjugal, the *femme fatale* constitutes a sanctioned discourse of female sexuality about which so-called repressive Victorians speak. Inviting panoptic mechanisms and surveillance, the spectacle of the *femme fatale* is pivotal in Victorian culture: she is the abnormality against which pure, normal femininity is measured and controlled. This division between 'Eternal' and 'natural' femininity into opposing camps of the Virgin/Whore binary installs a set of dichotomised pairs: *femme fatale/femme fragile*, witch/hysteric, vampire/zombie, prostitute/proper lady, working class/bourgeois, black/white, perpetrator/victim. Atwood's *femme fatale*, however, destabilises these boundaries: there are no clear cut evil/perpetrator and good/innocent women and the myth of the monstrous *femme fatale* explodes.

Because, as Magrit Shildrik points out, Foucault overlooks "the persistence of male dominance as a social form throughout the space and time of his enquiry," both Foucauldian and what Elizabeth Grosz calls "corporeal feminist" analyses will be necessary to consider the nexus of sexualised/pathologised/aestheticised and gendered bodies in a reading of the *femme fatale* in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and *The Robber Bride* (22). More importantly, Foucauldian and feminist approaches can be utilised to dislodge inspected and inscribed bodies and to illuminate the subversion and resistance of institutional and discursive authorities deployed in the name of the *femme fatale*.

The *femme fatale* in *The Robber Bride* and *Alias Grace* mobilises a rewriting of history and demands acknowledgment of the material 'branding' of individual female bodies while, at the same, noting the ways in which inscribed, objectified, inspected bodies retain subjectivity and agency, however strategic, provisional and temporary. In exposing the established paradigms of femininity as always unrepresentative, Atwood directs attention to the singular and heterogeneous; to the ways stereotypes are manipulated for strategic advantage and revealed as always too narrow in their containment of feminine subjectivities. *Alias Grace* and *The Robber*

Bride, therefore, can be read as revealing case studies “in the on-going feminist attempt to theorize the female body as something other than a fetishized object, always-already appropriated for male pleasure” (Rosenman 33).

Linked to fears of feminine power, the *femme fatale* is important for considering the institutional regimes enlisted to conquer improper female bodies. The *femme fatale* is employed in postmodern writing to survey the ways in which violent agency in women is denied. Freud set the standard in his explanation of the Medusa myth. For Freud, Medusa exemplifies the castrated woman but as Barbara Creed counters:

To argue that the Medusa’s severed head symbolizes the terrifying *castrated* female genitals, and that the snakes represent her fetishized and comforting imaginary phallus, is an act of wish fulfilment *par excellence*. Freud’s interpretation masks the active, terrifying aspects of the female genitals - the fact that they might castrate. The Medusa’s entire visage is alive with images of toothed vaginas, poised and waiting to strike. No wonder her male victims were rooted to the spot with fear. (*Monstrous* 111)

Medusa’s active gaze, grotesque body and sexuality are ‘castrated’ and frozen in one fell swoop and yet the myth is read by Freud as female envy rather than male fear (Creed, Owens, Travis). Furthermore, Freud’s interpretation carefully negates any threat of a castrating ‘*vagina dentata*’ Medusa. Rather than insisting that “she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing,” as Hélène Cixous does, Atwood’s subversion of Freud’s “Das Medusenhaupt” draws attention to the often hidden or restrained violence of women and the mechanisms behind what amounts to an essentialising of female subjectivity (“The Laugh” 255). Atwood’s *femme fatale* works against a restriction of femininity to passive and benign identities and provides the impetus for owning and taking responsibility for an otherwise repressed, ‘unnatural’ mode of female behaviour.

Atwood does not easily align, however, with a female tradition of writing that would insist upon survival and ‘victory’ of the transgressive female, nor does she champion a poststructuralist mode of subjectivity metaphorised in notions of the ‘hybrid’, the ‘nomad’, the ‘border-dweller’ or ‘deterritorialiser’ at the risk of domesticating the border and trivialising the domestic (Bhabha, Braidotti, Anzaldúa, Deleuze and

Guattari). Avoiding rigidity, Atwood's texts advocate a self-reflexive engagement with stereotypes of femininity and provide an account of performative feminine subjectivity and power that is strategic and shifting.



1 Aestheticising the *Femme Fatale*

Proceeding from turn-of-the-century modernist representations exemplified in the art of Edvard Munch and Gustav Klimt to *film noire* icons like Dietrich and Garbo and the contemporary cinematic, Madonna-esque “bitch-from-hell” (Jermyn), the *femme fatale* is easily recognisable for her mixture of haughty, sneering gaze, uncontrollable, evil laughter or enigmatic grin, beauty and evilness: she is a woman both feared and desired. Throughout Western imaginings of the *femme fatale*, she is either murderous or killed off, literally or symbolically, in order to preserve order and stability. Either way, her association with the corpse, which Kristeva identifies as the epitome of the abject, marks the affiliation of the *femme fatale* with death and decay (Powers 12). As a spectacle of the abject, she is correspondingly safely distanced as an object and aestheticised (Stewart 107).

The enduring trademarks of the popularised image of the fatal woman operate as a conflation of wonder and horror and suggest the presence of monstrosity. The “monstrous or deviant,” as Rosi Braidotti recognises, “is a figure of abjection in so far as it trespasses and transgresses the barriers between recognizable norms or definitions” (65). Kristeva asserts that: “[w]e may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity” (Powers 9). In psychoanalytic terms, the abject-border is that which must be separated and expunged in order for the self to cleanly and clearly emerge as an autonomous subject. Kristeva formulates the abject in the mother and child dyad, whereby, as Jonte-Pace claims, “matricide” is our “biological,” “psychic and vital necessity” (15). Taking the model of abjection from its ‘origins’ in maternal-child separation, the *femme fatale* can be easily situated here because she does not “respect borders, position, rules” and “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva Powers 4);

she functions, allegorically, as the devouring 'm/other' who threatens to dissipate the border between self and other.

The 'undead' and devouring imagery of the vampire characterise the "heavy-lidded gaze, pallor, long full throat, luxurious hair" of the turn-of-the century *femme fatale* (Allen 5). Virginia Allen argues that "even the most casual impressionistic survey of the visual artefacts, let alone the literature, of late nineteenth century Europe confirms the notion that there was an inundation of images now labelled femmes fatales" (10). Patrick Bade likewise attests to the "extraordinary proliferation of femmes fatales" in the Victorian period and marks "this preoccupation with evil and destructive women" as one of the "most striking features of late nineteenth-century culture" (6). Debora Silverman points to, in particular, Gustav Klimt's painting *Pallas Athena* (1898) as the prototypical representation of the "satanic and destructive" *femme fatale* (144). Klimt, however, was not alone as this motif is ever-present in the work of his contemporaries such as Edvard Munch. While Munch's *The Vampire* (1893) is unmistakable in its imagining of a devouring and fatalistic woman, paintings such as Klimt's *Judith* (1901), Munch's *Madonna* (1894-5) and *Salomé* (1903), depict the eroticisation of archetypes of female destruction and the construction of a *fin-de-siècle femme fatale* whose "duplicitous nature promises paradise in order to ensnare her victims" (Creed, *Monstrous* 106). What is most striking is the fixation on decapitating (castrating) women like Judith and Salomé. Munch's *Salomé* - a painting of his mistress Eva Mudocci and himself - envisages masculinity as decapitated and disembodied by the fibrous and tentacle-like hair of a sneering and smug *femme fatale*.

Drawing on archetypes such as "Cleopatra, Salome, Judith, Helen, mermaids and sirens," the *femme fatale* is "characterised above all by her "effect on men: a *femme* cannot be *fatale* without a male being present" (Stott viii, emphasis in the original). Accordingly, the lodging of the *femme fatale* as an essence of femininity emanates from male fantasies. Munch, for example, described woman as "the whore who at

all times of the day and night seeks to outwit man, to cause his fall” (Bade 24). Fellow playwright and artist, August Strindberg, once wrote: “of all the evil, the worst evil I have ever seen is the female sex: the hindrance, the hatred, the low calculation, the crudity, above all the inhuman threat to a spirit that wants to grow” (Bade 23).

The fear and loathing of Woman epitomised by Strindberg and Munch is seen to be a reaction against the rise of the turn-of-the-century “New Woman”. The late-Victorian ‘New Woman’ signalled the rise of the suffragist movement and precedents for women in a number of institutions and domains (Silverman 149), while the vision of the *femme fatale* as seductress corresponds to the political assertion of the New Woman’s sexuality (Gilbert and Gubar, *Sexchanges* xiv). Not only was there a modernist exertion against the real political gains and the emerging, horrifying sexuality of women, there was also the urge to fight off a metaphorical *vagina dentata* imagined as a consuming, feminised and Americanised popular/low culture (Clark, Scott). Although the *femme fatale* “can be prostitute, man-hunting aristocrat, vampire, African queen, native (black) woman or murderess” (Allen 9), she is often metaphorised as a whorish but alluring and cunning woman. She, therefore, comes to be most aligned with the prostitute, the working class woman and ‘American’ culture; with death, decay and the quashing of a creative, individual modernist spirit.

The representation of the *femme fatale* as a distinct ‘type’ affords an understanding of the classifying and normalising practices imposed on female subjectivity. As Rebecca Stott argues: “incessant classification and naming became a feature of the late Victorian period: an instinct to define and measure culture by what it ought not to be” (23). The *femme fatale* enters into the scheme of things as the way a female “ought not to be,” while another pervasive icon of Victorian femininity, that of the idyllic “Angel-in-the-House,” sets the ideal standard. Canonised in the poetry of Coventry Patmore and once conjured by the American writer Kate Chopin as “the

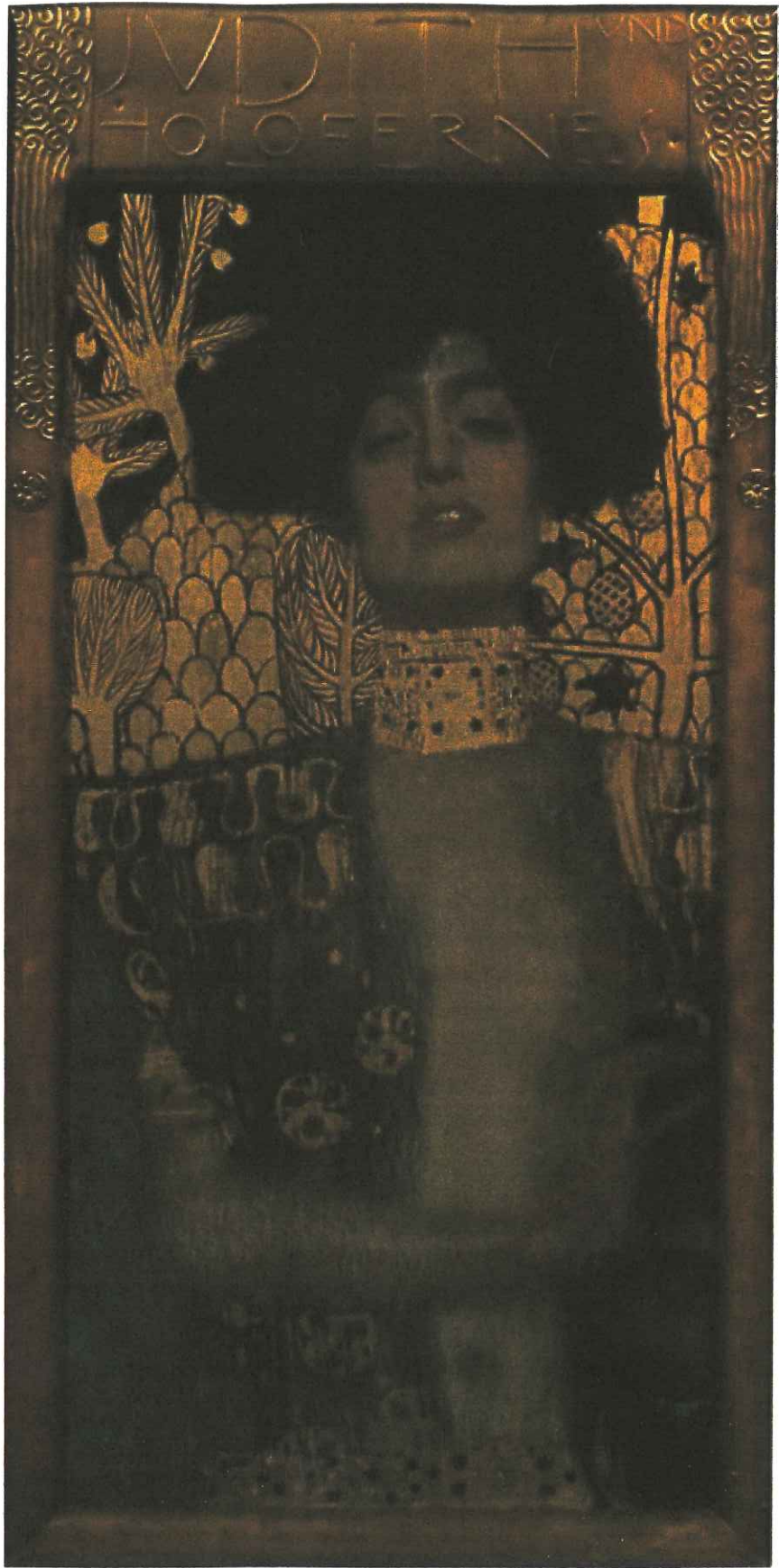
embodiment of every womanly grace” (51), ‘Angels-in-the-House’ were, as Chopin ironises in *The Awakening*, “women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” and who were content to be in a constant state of ‘*accouchement*’ (51-52). As Virginia Allen puts it “as Mary and Eve stand in opposition, so also do “The Angel-in-the-House,” that popular Victorian image, and terrible Astarte”(6). Feminist writers such as Mary Poovey and Elaine Showalter categorise the ‘Angel-in-the-House’ as not only popular, but ideological: the icon of sweet, suffering, white Victorian motherhood was the norm against which all ‘others’ were measured and became, as Barbara Christian contends, “the repository of white civilisation” (6).

These opposing images of femininity converge in their connection to death and abjectivity. As Cixous writes, “women have no choice other than to be decapitated, and in any case the moral is if they don’t actually lose their heads by the sword, *they only keep them on condition that they lose them* - lose them, that is, to complete silence, turned into automatons” (“Castration” 346). Either zombie or vampire, fecundity or (un)dead, ‘proper’ or punished, femininity in late-Victorian, modernist art circulates as the site of the liminal and the abject. According to Elisabeth Bronfen, “the feminine body is culturally constructed as the superlative site of alterity; culture uses art to dream the deaths of beautiful women” (xi). The beautiful dead, an image pursued particularly in the late-Victorian Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, is inscribed with down-cast eyes, neat hair, a melancholic expression, docility, tranquillity and passivity. Indeed, the difference between these two models of femininity is precisely the state of activity assigned to them. Whereas the *femme fatale* is gazing, active, erect, enveloped by images of fluidity, the ‘classic’ status of the demure, virginal, Victorian model is deathly in her static position as a ‘still-life’. Sandra Kemp argues that the “covert project and subtext of male modernism was *cherchez la femme*, and the woman’s body was a still-life in the literal, English sense: life suspended, at once objectified by their gaze and subject of their fantasies;

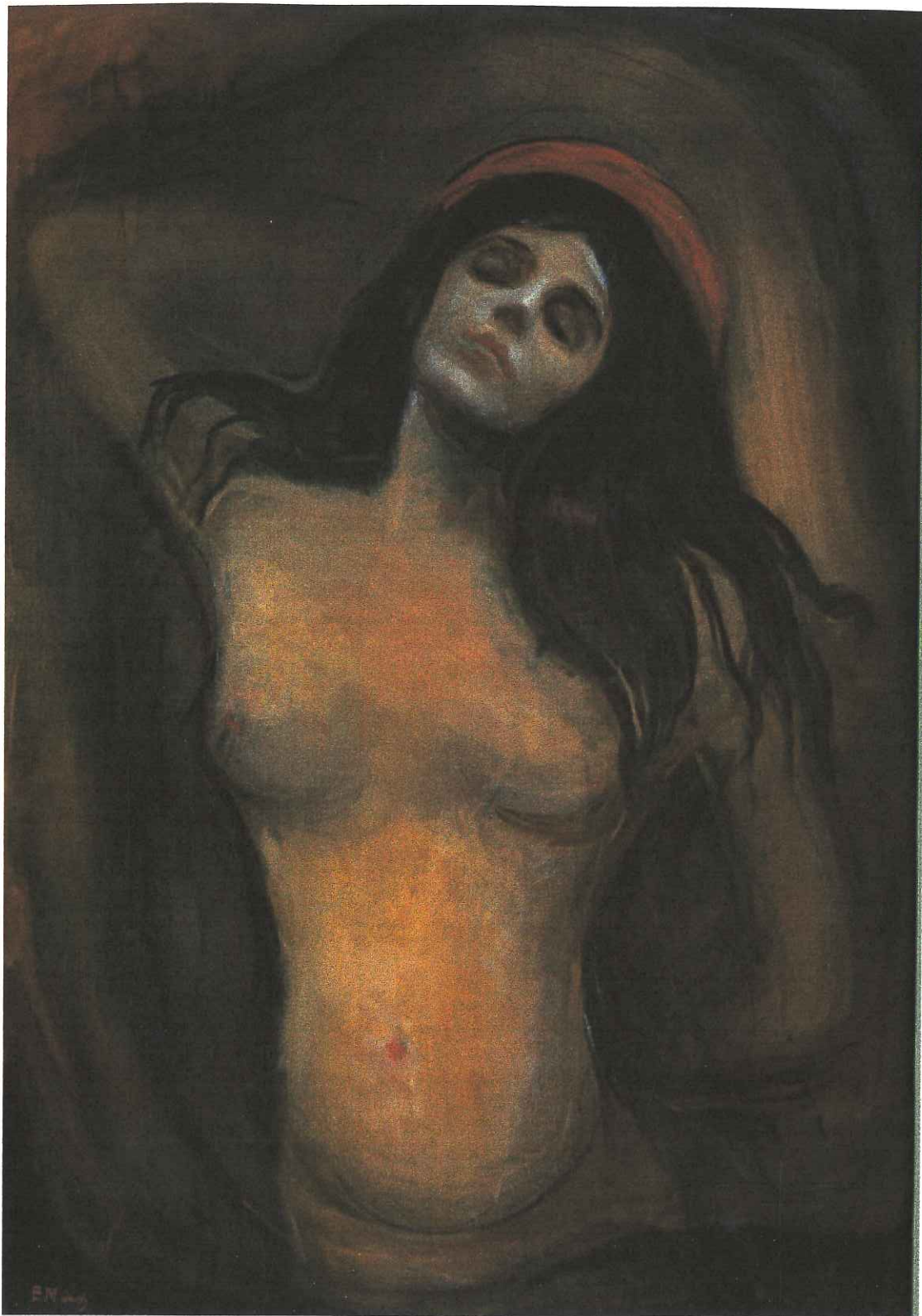
at once impervious to their look and brought to life by it” (6-7). *Cherchez la femme*, imagined and represented in male modernist art, extended to a number of emerging knowledges whose central concern was none less than Woman, body, mind and soul, and inexplicably wed to fears of the castrating *femme fatale*.



**Edvard Munch, *The Vampire*, 1893.
Private Collection.**



Gustav Klimt, *Judith*, 1901.
Osterreichische Galerie, Vienna.



Edvard Munch, *Madonna*, 1894-1895,
National Gallery, Oslo.



Edvard Munch, *Salomé*, 1903.
Private Collection, Oslo.

2 *Alias Grace*: Mapping the Nineteenth Century Femme Fatale

As a historiographic metafictional text, *Alias Grace* offers a starting point to consider the ideological construction of the *femme fatale* in the nineteenth century. She is “apparently necessary to the cultural expressions of the closing years of the century” and, although linked to the newly politicised ‘New Woman’, she also connects to the imperial episteme (Stott viii). The “will to know” what Freud called the “dark continent” of femininity confirms the inclusion of the female body in the late-nineteenth century colonising frenzy (Stott 27). In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud declares female sexuality as “still veiled in an impenetrable obscurity” and, most famously, puzzles over what it was that Woman wanted (cited in Doane, “Veiling” 118). Throughout *Alias Grace* there are references to leading ‘doctors of the mind’ such as Freud’s predecessor, the mesmerist Jean-Martin Charcot, and to the French philosopher and scientist, Maine de Biran, who “said there was an inner New World to be discovered, for which one must ‘plunge into the subterranean caverns of the soul’ ” (*Alias* 348). The conception of the *femme fatale* was informative in the exercise of colonising power over the female body in which the “taming of the beast,” of the bodily other, extended to a monitoring of the bodily pure (Stewart 110).

A beastly other, the *femme fatale*, as Stott argues, “takes her place amongst degeneration anxieties, the rise of invasion scares, anxieties about ‘sexuality’ and ‘race’, and concerns about cultural ‘virility’ and fitness” (22). Similarly, Creed asserts that “woman was particularly aligned with nature because of a widely held belief in a pseudo-scientific theory known as the theory of ‘devolution’ . . . [W]hile man was in general constantly evolving, some men and all women were in danger of

devolving to lower animal forms” (“Lesbian” 96). Warning against a simplistic causal relationship between the *femme fatale* and imperial consciousness, Stott nonetheless emphasises the integral place of the *femme fatale* in a colonial context consumed with panics over degeneration and the terror of incorporation by the ‘barbaric other’. Woman, envisaged at one extreme as docile zombie and on the other as innately savage, was seen as the ‘weak link’ between the colonial self and the ‘native other’. Feminine vulnerability extended to the perceived inevitable cooptation by the ‘savage’ other: this invocation of proprietorial white femininity raised fears, explicitly or tacitly, of miscegenation and a dilution of white purity and bourgeois ascendancy (Crosby).

The huge spectacle and lasting mythology of the story of Grace Marks arises out of what Atwood describes in the afterword of the text as its “combination of sex, violence, and the deplorable insubordination of the lower classes” (537). Labelled a *femme fatale*, Grace Marks was caught up not only in the Victorian ideology regarding gender, but was also a pawn in leading political debates of nineteenth century Canada and particularly those surrounding the Mackenzie Rebellion of Upper Canada in 1837. The association of Mackenzie’s treason with insurgent American republicanism found a perfect site of expression in the murders of Captain Thomas Kinnear and his mistress, and housekeeper Nancy Montgomery, at the hands of the stable-boy, James McDermott, and the maidservant, Grace Marks, in 1843. Invasion scares in Canada after the War of 1812 were primarily associated with usurping ‘Americanised’, politicised, lower classes, rather than the uprising of ‘savage natives’. Grace’s lawyer points out to her psychoanalyst, Dr. Simon Jordan, the significance of the timing of Grace’s trial in the aftermath of the Mackenzie Rebellion, stating that in those days “feeling ran high against” the leader of the rebels and “that alone could have put a noose around Grace Marks’ neck” (432). The demonisation of a devouring, female culture personified in images of the *femme fatale* has particular salience in a Canadian setting, whereby, allegorically, Canada comes to occupy the hysterical, paranoid but always innocent Gothic heroine in

counterdistinction to the perpetrator America - an allegory Atwood has considered in *Surfacing* (Irvine) and one that fits well with the reigning “imperial Gothic” mindset (Stott 5). The *femme fatale*, therefore, articulates fears related to national, individual and class integrity and identity and provides the impetus for a heightened surveillance of ideologically-reflexive femininity.

Knowing the Female Body

Illustrating the mind/body Cartesian split of Masculine-European-Mind over Feminine-Other-Body, Judith Butler emphasises the philosophical underpinnings of an always-already penetrated female body in opposition to the conscious, impenetrable masculine subject (*Bodies* 50-51). The penetrable and corporeal essence of the female, in counterdistinction to the conscious subjectivity of masculinity, legitimates the transposing of colonising activities of the land to the space of the female body. Simon, the young doctor, links woman to the savagery of a ‘dark continent’:

It was knowledge they craved; yet they could not admit to craving it, because it was forbidden knowledge - knowledge with a lurid glare to it; knowledge gained through a descent into the pit. He has been where they could never go, seen what they could never see; he has opened up women’s bodies, and peered inside. In his hand, which has just raised their own hands towards his lips, he may once have held a beating female heart. (94)

Simon’s descent into the savage heart of darkness, his “descent into the pit” of the female/still-life body, is into the literal heart of the female body and can be located in emerging clinical anatomy practices. Braidotti describes the late-nineteenth century as a time when “the doors of bodily perception” opened (72). Initiated by the will to know the maternal body, clinical anatomy “is a practice that consists in deciphering the body, transforming the organism into a text to be read and interpreted by a knowledgable medical gaze” (Ibid.). The wavering line between representing the mysterious, iconic female and incising the ‘dark continent’ of her body demonstrates “a profound complicity between aesthetics and medicine” in which “the question of

woman,” as Barbara Johnson has pointedly observed, is “as much aesthetic as it is medical” (256). It is once again Simon, representing the knowing gaze of the male doctor/subject, who conflates aesthetic and surgical exploration of the female body:

for a good surgeon, as for a good sculptor, the ability to detach oneself from the business at hand was a prerequisite. A sculptor should not allow *himself* to be distracted by the transient charms of his model, but should regard *her* objectively, as merely the base material or clay from which his work of art was to be formed. Similarly, a surgeon was a sculptor of flesh; he should be able to slice into a human body as deliberately and delicately as if carving a cameo. (216-217; emphasis added)

Significantly, Munch likened his “dissection” of the soul and the psyche of the human (and usually female) body through art to Leonardo da Vinci’s taboo anatomical dissections (Schneede 18). The progression from aesthetics to medical anatomy and psychoanalysis illuminates the domains of rational knowledges enlisted to know and tame the penetrable, female body. It is a formulation in which Woman is the ‘material’ or the ground which Man shapes and inscribes.

Who can Know the *Femme Fatale*?

Dr. Jordan’s positioning as the voyeuristic “one who knows,” in distinction to the ladies who were forbidden such knowledge, points to one of the ways femininity is coerced into passive innocence (Ulmer 308). The Victorian assumption of the contagious nature of both criminality and lesbianism, two quintessential characteristics of the *femme fatale*, meant that it was better not to publicise the reality of either (Hart). Lynda Hart argues that behind the silencing of monstrous femininity lay the presumed “inevitability of femininity collapsing into criminality” (43). As she contends, “women readers who voraciously consumed the narratives of criminal women, and the women spectators who packed both the popular theatre and that other theatrical scene - the courtrooms where the real woman were on trial - perhaps did indeed see ‘something like the truth,’ as Victorian critics feared” (Ibid.).

Enveloped by the “olfactory gauze” of Miss Lydia, who ‘wolfishly’ bares all her teeth when she smiles (*à la vagina dentata*), Simon disapproves when, with relish, she declares that she would have attended the execution of James McDermott. He claims that women “should not attend such grisly spectacles” because they “pose a danger to their refined natures” and “produce bloodthirsty fancies in the weaker-minded part of the population” (100). Despite his paternalism, Simon is “under no illusions as to the innate refinement of women; but all the more reason to safeguard the purity of those still pure. . . . In such a cause, hypocrisy is surely justified: one must present what ought to be true as if it really is” (100). Foucault binds the ‘secreting’ and ‘civilising’ of punishment as a reform to the spectacle of the scaffold to a “new class power” which “colonized the legal institution” (*Discipline* 232). Atwood, however, emphasises the cause of safeguarding the civility of ‘decent’ bourgeois femininity against the contaminating *femme fatale* in the privatisation of punishment.

The belief in Woman’s potential mimetic identification with ‘evil villainesses’ implies a fear of uprising Amazons and places femininity within a vampire/zombie dichotomy whereby the *femme fatale*, vampire contaminates the passive, zombie, consuming woman. The will to prove Grace innocent fits within the framework of a ‘secreting’ of violence and subjugation of agency in the criminal female. Mary Ann Doane considers Nietzsche’s rendering of hypocritical and mimeticist Woman, always blind and unconscious of her own deceptions, as “absolutely necessary in order to maintain the man’s idealization of her” (“Veiled” 123). Deprived of subjectivity “[s]he does not *know* that she is deceiving or *plans* to deceive; conscious deception would be repellent to the man and quite dangerous. Rather, she intuits or ‘divines’ what the man needs - a belief in her innocence - and she *becomes* innocent” (Ibid.).

Feminine subjectivity, therefore, belongs either to the realm of pure, passive innocence or stalking menace. Simon is suspicious of all women and constantly on

the watch for the pathology of the *femme fatale*. He describes the maid Dora as “[s]ullen, brutish, vengeful; a mind that exists at a sub-rational level, yet cunning, slippery and evasive. There’s no way to corner her. She’s a greased pig” (70). Opposed to the threat of a cunning female was the threat of suffocating domestic femininity. Simon is invariably drowning under the alternate demands of his mother and his mistress, Mrs. Rachel Humphrey, and thinks their gratitude is like “being fawned on by rabbits, or like being covered with syrup: you can’t get it off (422). His mother’s “plottings and enticements” to marry him off to Miss Faith Cartwright are considered a death trap: “[d]oes his mother really believe that he can be charmed by such a vision of himself - married to Faith Cartwright and imprisoned in an armchair by the fire, frozen in a kind of paralyzed cocoon, or like a fly snarled in the web of a spider?” (340). Conjuring the bloodsucking, *vagina dentata* of the vampire *femme fatale*, he feels as if Grace is “drawing his energy out of him - using his own mental forces to materialise the figures in her story, as the mediums are said to do during their trances” (338).

Pathologising the *Femme Fatale*

Once pathologised by the psychoanalytic gaze, the criminalised, savage *femme fatale* is subdued into non-threatening innocence (Hart 150). Atwood, however, continually deflates the assumed power garnered by the analyst/doctor over the female object of study. As Bronfen asserts: “[i]t was commonly believed that the hypnotised, often feminine medium, in its corpse-like state, could gain access to the realm of the dead and enter into a dialogue with the deceased” (4). Grace’s ability to turn Simon into the medium for spirits - a vocation usually preserved in Spiritualism for the woman’s body, encoded as vulnerable and penetrable - reveals her resistance to a discourse that would examine and explicate her actions, excavate all signs of ‘masculine’ malice and turn her into a known type. The belief that, as Dr. DuPont informs Simon, “woman in general have a more fragile nervous organisation, and

consequently a greater suggestibility,” making them “a good deal easier to hypnotize” (350), is inverted in Grace and Simon’s sessions:

But, today listening to her low, candid voice - like the voice of a childhood nurse reciting a well-loved story - he almost goes to sleep; only the sound of his own pencil hitting the floor pulls him awake. For a moment, he thinks he’s gone deaf, or suffered a small stroke: he can see her lips moving, but he can’t interpret any of the words. This however is only a trick of consciousness, for he can remember - once he sets his mind to it - everything she’s been saying. (338)

Susan Rubin Suleiman, following Shoshana Felman, models the act of transference between analyst and analysand on the relationship between the reader-critic and the writer-producer of a text. Putting the reader in the place of the analyst, Atwood confounds our ability - both the writer’s reconstruction of past events and the reader’s dialogic making of the text - to ever know the truth about the deemed *femme fatale*, Grace Marks. Suleiman argues that while for Freud “transference is the effect of the *patient’s* desire, to be ‘read’ by the analyst,” in the Lacanian model, transference is “also the effect of the *analyst’s* desire” (91). Simon’s desire is to read the text of Grace Marks as it “ought to be,” but it is Grace’s power in presenting herself as a text for her own advantage that is continually stressed. Contrary to Simon’s wish to dig deep and open Grace like an “oyster” or a “locked box,” Grace remarks that he “doesn’t understand much of what I say” because “like most gentlemen he often wants a thing to mean more than it does” (282).

The force of Simon’s desire to read the text of Grace’s life and to make her conform to a known, feminine ‘type’ is established the first time he meets her. Simon sees “long wisps of auburn hair escaping what appeared at first glance to be a chaplet of white flowers - and especially the eyes, enormous in the pale face and dilated with fear, or with mute pleading - all was as it should be. He’d seen many hysterics at Salpêtrière in Paris who looked very much like this,” but as she approaches from the shadows, she is “straighter, taller, more self-possessed, wearing the conventional dress of the Penitentiary, with a striped blue and white skirt beneath which were two feet, not naked at all but enclosed in ordinary shoes. There was even less escaped hair than he’d thought: most of it was tucked up under a white cap” (68).

Significantly, the most striking features of Grace are her eyes and the gaze “frankly assessing him” as if “she were contemplating the subject of some unexplained experiment; as if it were he, and not she, who was under scrutiny” (68). Simon’s characteristically ‘feminine’ expectations - “imagination and fancy,” “melodrama” and “overheated brain” (69) - reveal that he is the one feminised and penetrated by the examination of the *femme fatale*. Grace’s pleasure and power “kindles at having to evade” the power of the psychiatric investigation, to “flee from it, fool it, travesty it,” thus overturing the power and pleasure of the expert doctor (Foucault, *History* 324). The roles of penetrator and penetrated are inverted.

The story of Grace’s life is unravelled in her sessions with Dr. Jordan but, granted the interior narrative of Grace, the reader is aware of the conflicting selves between those she presents to Dr. Jordan and to the public world and the self she keeps in resistance of the doctor’s will to know. When he attempts to retrieve her repressed memory of the murders of Nancy Montgomery and Thomas Kinnear through dream analysis, Grace makes up meaningless dreams, withholding her own for herself. She thinks: “I have so little enough of my own, no belongings, no possessions, no privacy to speak of, and I need to keep something for myself; and in any case, what use could he have for my dreams, after all?” (116). Grace’s refusal to succumb constitutes an effective means of maintaining agency and self-determination and plays such havoc with Simon, he ends up hysterical and on the verge of a nervous breakdown: “I have come close to nervous exhaustion over this matter. *Not to know* - to scratch at hints and portents, at intimations, at tantalizing whispers - it is as bad as being haunted” (490). The imagining of the *femme fatale* as a ghostly ‘other’ puts the doctor in the place of the terrorised, hysterical Gothic heroine: the inversion of objectivity/femininity and subjectivity/masculinity fostered in the knowing doctor/known patient relationship is complete.

When Grace does assume the corpse-like pose of the passive, hypnotised female, this episode remains ambiguous and can be read as a manipulation of the stereotype for

her own gains. The hypnotist, Dr. Jerome DuPont, turns out to be her old friend, Jeremiah, the peddler, whom she first met when she was employed at the home of Mrs. Alderman Parkinson. When Jeremiah arrives at Thomas Kinnear's place, fearing danger for Grace, he offers her the opportunity to travel with him as a "medical clairvoyant" who would "go into a trance, and speak in a hollow voice, and tell the people what was wrong with them, for a fee of course" (310). The performance of the 'clairvoyant medium' is made clear in Jeremiah's offer but, after providing this information, Atwood then sets up the possibility of a hoax orchestrated between Jeremiah and Grace to 'prove' her innocence/madness and to offer narrative closure.

Under hypnosis, Grace reveals her alter-ego, Mary Whitney and in true *femme fatale* fashion maliciously reveals: "I'd let [James] kiss me, and touch me as well, all over, Doctor, the same places you'd like to touch me, because I can always tell, I know what you're thinking when you sit in that stuffy little sewing room with me. But that was all I'd let him do. I had him on a string and Mr. Kinnear as well" (465). Indeed, her 'impersonation' of the *femme fatale* invokes the precise imagery of the modernist conception of a desirable and manipulative woman. The symptoms of multiple personality disorder (dissociative identity disorder), or *dédoublement* as it was originally called, accords with this modernist imagining of fatal femininity. Ian Hacking describes the nineteenth century pathology of the "female double" as "sweet as a nightingale" in one state and "so ferocious that she horrifies her closest companions" in the other (72). Read literally, Grace's diagnosis as a female double or split personality embodies the extreme splitting of female subjectivities into 'Angel-in-the-House' and *femme fatale* dichotomies.

The *Femme Fatale* and the Bourgeois Hysteric

Rather than a known, criminalised, medicalised subjectivity, Atwood advances a conception of the *femme fatale* as heterogeneous, irreducible and slippery. The inversion of the male-subject-voyeur and the female-object-spectacle produced in the relationship between Grace and Simon, acts as a barrier to gender performance. In her stubbornness to yield, to lay down and just 'be', the *femme fatale* impairs the performance of masculinity. Although Simon positions himself not only as the knowing doctor but as the knight in shining armour who "has come to rescue her," these roles are both knocked down by Grace (68). Grace understands her position in relation to those who want her submission: "Confess, confess" she mocks, "Let me forgive and pity. Let me get a Petition for you. Tell me all" (39). Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the psychoanalyst is the "most recent figure of the priest" (154) and in both the 'talking cure' and the confession, improper femininity and agency is revoked, the savage woman mastered.

Hart elaborates Sarah Kofman's distinction between the criminal and the hysteric to show how opposing modes of femininity are propped up: "Kofman's 'criminal' is the woman who knows her own secret and refuses to share it, because she is, or thinks she is, self-sufficient. By submitting to the 'cure', the hysteric, on the other hand, becomes complicit with the analyst's desire. That is, the transference constitutes the analyst as the subject-supposed-to-know" (70). In contrast to the unyielding *femme fatale* is the submissive Victorian bourgeois 'lady'. Simon's encounter with the Governor's wife reinforces the distinction:

She fixes him with a deep and meaningful gaze, and Simon sighs inwardly. He is familiar with that expression: she is about to make him an unsolicited gift of her symptoms. . . . When he first received his medical degree, he was unprepared for the effect it would have on women; women of the better classes, married ladies especially, with blameless reputations. (94)

The bourgeois, hysteric female and the analyst collude in a performance of proper, class-specific gender roles. Cixous and Clément suggest that it is the hysteric who "bears the brunt of producing a medical spectacle" (8), advancing how the hysteric

comes to produce her 'self', paradoxically, as hyper-normal and proper, bourgeois womanhood. For Cixous and Clément the sorceress, as archetypal *femme fatale*, is marked by "her hair undone, not contained in a bonnet or headdress. All her hair loose because she is nature," while the "hysteric will detest hair"(39). The repulsion of hair and nature reinstates the 'better classed', civilised woman as the antithesis of savagery, impropriety and 'otherness'. As Elizabeth Grosz puts it: "the hysteric can be seen as the polar opposite of the 'savage'" (*Volatile* 139). While Bronfen argues that "hysteria is also the site of Woman's resistance in culture" (267), Susan Bordo points out that the resistance of the hysteric, devoid of subjectivity, is ultimately limited. Moreover, hysteria as the locale of Woman's resistance posits a universal mode of subversive femininity; hysteria is a form of strategic resistance exclusively available and efficacious to middle-class, white 'ladies'.

Prone to hysteria and problems of the nerves, emotions and psyche, the bourgeois female submits herself for inspection and mastery; the interiorised 'markings' of the bourgeois body offer a salient counterpoint to the working-class, corporeally 'savage' female. Grace continually comments on how the "ladies of Kingston" imagine themselves without legs, smell or bodily functions while her material, corporeal essence is, as a prisoner, as a worker in the bourgeois home, constantly on display and scrutinised. Grace's persistent affirmation of the surface, the material and the body, rather than the 'deep and meaningful', draws attention to the enforced surface markings of her body, of her status as the always-already *femme fatale*. Stallybrass and White suggest that class-based distinctions of bodily signs begin in the Victorian bourgeois household at an early age:

the spotless homes of the bourgeoisie depended upon hired servants who became 'tired and dirty', cleaning on their hands and knees . . . at the same time, the bourgeois child was made to learn a repertoire of bodily postures which was the antithesis of the maid's: 'little ladies and gentlemen did not sit on steps; they stood absolutely straight; they did not whistle, scuff or slouch.' (154)

Moreover, as they contend, the working class body becomes, under the gaze of the employer, a sexualised object. Through Simon's reminiscences and fantasies of the

maidservants, the “Effies” and “Alices”, in his family home, there is an enforcement of a repertoire of eroticised bodily postures on the female worker. Grace, therefore, signals availability, carnality and sexuality under the possessing subjectivity, voyeuristic gaze and transcendent stance of her masters as this dynamic between herself and her employer, Mr. Kinnear, reveals:

I was washing it in the proper way, kneeling down with each knee on an old clout because of the hardness of the stone, and with my shoes and stockings off, because to do a good job you have to get right down to it, and my sleeves rolled up past the elbows and my skirt and petticoats pulled back between my legs and tucked into the sash of my apron, which is what you have to do, Sir, to save your stockings and clothes, as anyone knows who has ever scrubbed a floor. . . . I heard someone come into the kitchen behind me. . . . He stayed standing in the doorway, and it came to me that he was watching my bare ankles and legs, dirty as they were, and - if you'll excuse me, Sir - my backside moving back and forth with the scrubbing, like a dog wagging its rump. (320-321)

When Nancy Montgomery happens on the scene to find her lover ogling Grace, she follows up the production of Grace's body by focussing, significantly, on her loose hair: “for God's sake pin up your hair. . . . You look like a common slut!” (321).

The maid-servant, constructed as ‘sluttish’, could always be held responsible for her master's harassment. As Grace recounts: “I knew that lock or no lock, sooner or later he would find a way of getting in, with a ladder if nothing else . . . and once you are found with a man in your room you are the guilty one, no matter how they get in. As Mary used to say, there are some of the masters who think you owe them service twenty-four hours a day, and should do the main work flat on your back” (231). The creation of a seductive *femme fatale* upholds the image of vulnerable and beyond-control male sexuality as well as the propriety and authority of a ‘civilised’ gentleman - a dynamic apparent in President Clinton's frequent ‘encounters’ with ‘big-haired’ Southern/Californian working-class or junior female employees. Late-nineteenth century beliefs that the “potential for prostitution was inherent in the lower-class female” provided “the image of the female as the active seductress” (Gilman 43). Grace's status as a *femme fatale* is sealed from the start.

As an eroticised spectacle, Grace perceives: “[t]hat is what really interests them - the gentlemen and the ladies both. They don't care if I killed anyone, I could have cut

dozens of throats, it's only what they admire in a soldier, they'd scarcely blink. No: was I really a paramour, is their chief concern and they don't even know themselves whether they want the answer to be no or yes" (30). The 'real' transgression of the *femmes fatales* in the text is drawn not only around sexuality but also along class lines. The attempts of Mary Whitney and Nancy Montgomery to better their stations in life as working-class girls through an attachment to a well-to-do man is what cements these two as predatory and fatal. Ellen Brinks' concern for the 'economic violence' wreaked yet overlooked in the film *Single White Female* is pertinent to consider the transgression of *Alias Grace's* *femmes fatales*. Brinks argues that it is the working-class woman's attempt to appropriate the clothes and look of her professional roommate that disrupts boundaries of class and identity and is most offensive (5). Grace's 'inappropriate' wearing of Nancy Montgomery's clothes is what shocks most and, indeed, is what damns her (Murch 72). This is made explicit when Grace relates Jamie Walsh's testimony to Simon: "he pointed at me, and said, 'She's got on Nancy's dress, the ribbons under her bonnet are also Nancy's, and the tippets she has on, and also the parasol in her hand'. At that there was a great outcry in the courtroom, like the uprush of voices at the Judgement Day; and I knew I was doomed" (419).

As an object of scientific inquiry, of political and religious reformists' pursuits and a sanctioned spectacle of sexuality, Grace sees that for the Governor's wife she is "an object of fear, like a spider, and of charity as well, I am also one of the accomplishments" who can be carted out to be displayed for the ladies of Kingston to "stare without appearing to, out from under their bonnets" (24). Instead of photos of Niagara Falls, photos of Grace adorn the Governor's wife's scrapbook, corroborating Grace's role as a souvenir, a spectacular object to be visited. The Governor's scrapbook of killers returns the repressed and, despite Foucault's insistence on the secreting of punishment, emphasises what Bennett has called the dominance of an "exhibitionary complex" in which the spectacle of the deviant was maintained, albeit safely distanced and contained (73). As Atwood points out,

people did visit and inspect Grace Marks as they would an exotic animal in a zoo (538). Backed up by Grace's role as a servant in the Governor's house, ownership and control over a safely distanced object is further conferred upon the Governor's wife. Asserting her authority over Grace, the Governor's wife repeatedly separates and abjects the criminalised and uncivilised body of the *femme fatale* from the purity and interiority of her 'self'. The hysteric's power to recruit the entire family to her cause and to disrupt rational, phallographic discourse, signals a muted subversion and can just as easily assign her as powerless dependent (Cixous and Clément 5). Hyper-feminine performances may, in their excess, work to undo the idea of natural femininity but, embedded in a hyper-bourgeoisie production, the proper 'lady' often extracts power from 'other' women.

Despite qualifying as female 'curio', Grace, particularly in her relationship with Simon, turns the subjective, masculine gaze back on itself, freezing the male spectator into a 'still-life' object. Atwood illuminates the way power can lodge in "dangerous nooks and crannies," to use Natalie Zemon Davis's phrase (cited in Newton 1). Because Grace is an anomaly and a spectacle, she is granted mobility as she travels to and from the prison everyday to work in the Governor's home and to her therapy sessions, but this is a very contingent mode of power if in fact Grace was innocent all along. Given that her guilt or innocence remains insoluble, the extent of subversive power allotted to Grace depends on a shifting perspective. She cannot, however, be fixed as a victim and her ability to subvert institutional power engenders, following Haraway, a focus on situated, local and provisional knowledges and counter-knowledges. The notion of an overarching, grand narrative of class or gender power is broken up, opening spaces of continual subversion. Power, like resistance, is not everywhere and always the same but embodied in a multitude of settings and relationships, in what Michel de Certeau has emphasised, the "practice of everyday life," flickering as Foucault sees in "a woman's gesture in a window, a door left ajar, the smile of a guard before a forbidden threshold" (cited in Probyn *Outside* 13).

3 *The Robber Bride:* Spatialising Female Subjects

If *Alias Grace* provides the historical foundations of the *femme fatale*, *The Robber Bride* serves to remind “female spectators of the shaky foundation upon which their claims to respectability had been erected” and to “blur the distinction between ‘bad’ and ‘good’ women” (Hart 29). Zenia, the *femme fatale* / ‘robber bride’ of the story encroaches upon three different women’s lives by stealing their men and shattering their domestic happiness. Despite the women’s desire to ‘other’ Zenia and see themselves as innocent victims of her wiles, their unfolding narratives underscore not only their reliance on Zenia but also their complicity with her. Rather than maintaining their own innocence as well as their male partners’ in relation to the stalking Zenia, they must learn to acknowledge the excluded ‘Zenia-ness’ in themselves. One of the ways this distancing of the self from the ‘other woman’ is metaphorised in the text is through the different relationships Zenia and her ‘victims’, Tony, Roz, and Charis, have to space. Mapping and spatial tropes dominate much of the text (Beyer). Apart from it being set in Toronto and referring to ‘real’ places within the city, the separate narratives of each protagonist are closely related to their matriarchal homes. The differentiation between home and city, besides replicating the private/public split, informs the women’s production of self and re-enacts the opposition between transgressive and legitimate feminine identities.

Moving Through Space

In recent critical theory, attention has been paid to the feminising of space as an adjunct to the notion of spatialised femininity (Kirby, Kristeva, Rosenman). Space as feminised signals its availability for taming and conquest, a concept Atwood traces in early expedition narratives to the “malevolent north” of Canada in *Strange Things* (18). In these pioneering narrative, the ice-locked, savage north is personified as a seductive and destructive *femme fatale* luring young explorers to their death. The notion of city-space as always feminised is equally strengthened in that epitome of nineteenth century modernist, “sophisticated urban consciousness”, the *flâneur* (Wilson 280).

In the writings of Baudelaire and Benjamin, the city is a labyrinth to be discovered and penetrated and, with its unpredictable, emotional, hysterical, indeterminate masses, the image of the female body is frequently conjured (Rosenman 37; Wilson 280-81). Benjamin’s description of the Baudelairean *flâneur* reveals the ambivalence of the modernist bourgeois subject to the masses of the city streets.

According to Benjamin, if Baudelaire

succumbed to the force by which he was drawn to them and, as a *flâneur*, was made one of them, he was nevertheless unable to rid himself of a sense of their essentially inhuman make-up. He becomes their accomplice even as he dissociates himself from them. He becomes deeply involved with them, only to relegate them to oblivion with a single glance of contempt. (174)

Despite Benjamin’s ostensible criticism of the elitist pose Baudelaire struck in his wandering through Paris, both of these European *flâneurs* in their fascination towards the prostitute - the quintessential street-walker - distinguished the desire and gaze of a masculine wanderer and voyeur. Elizabeth Wilson points out that the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century male *flâneur* was preoccupied with “sexual unease and the pursuit of sexuality outside the constraints of the family” and “prostitutes and prostitution recur continually in the discussion of urban life, until it almost seems as though to be a woman in the city, is to become a prostitute - a public woman” (280, 282). Lynn Hunt links the notion of the ‘public’ woman as prostitute

to political themes enlisted to continually police femininity in public places (10). Harking back to modernist representations of femininity, the intertwining of female subjectivity and city space fixes a stratified notion of Woman and lays the foundations for the exclusion of proper femininity in city spaces. Wilson argues: “Woman is present in cities as temptress, as whore, as fallen woman, as lesbian, but also as virtuous womanhood in danger, as heroic womanhood who triumphs over temptation and tribulation” (283).

Zenia fulfils the aesthetics of a modernist *femme fatale par excellence* with her “long white throat, the dark electrical hair, the left eyebrow quirked, the mulberry-coloured mouth curved up at the edges in that maddening, secretive smile” (95). Fittingly, Zenia belongs to the city space: “the chattering voices, the smoke and wine fumes, the thick breath-filled city, all are working for Zenia” (66). Roz calls Zenia a “street fighter,” remarking: “[t]he way she’s striding through the room proclaims her sense of re-entry, of staking out the territory: a tiny contemptuous upcurved smirk, a conscious pelvic swagger, as if she’s got two pearl-handled revolvers slung on her hips and is just waiting for an excuse to use them” (101-102).

The opening chapters of the text recount each woman’s difficult history with Zenia and detail the events of the morning leading up to a lunch date between the three at the ‘Toxique’ on Queen West, where they encounter the ‘reincarnated’ Zenia. In these opening chapters, the different relationship to space between the *femme fatale* and innocent womanhood is mapped. (280). In opposition to the public, ‘street-fighting’ *femme fatale*, heroic womanhood under siege is fulfilled as each protagonist winds her way through the streets of Toronto. On her way to the Toxique, Tony

keeps to the outside of the sidewalk, away from the walls and the ragged figures who lean against them. Ostensibly they want small change, but Tony sees them in a more sinister light. They are spies, scouting the territory before a mass invasion; or else they are refugees, the walking wounded, in retreat before the coming onslaught. Either way she steers clear. Desperate people alarm her, she grew up with two of them. They’ll hit out, they’ll grab at anything. (26)

Charis's route to the Toxique exhibits a similar relationship to space as she "heads out onto the street, trying not to breathe too much" (61). Meanwhile, Roz "parks the Benz in an outdoor lot off Queen and hopes that nobody will flatten her tires, jimmy her trunk, or scratch her clean, recently polished dark blue paint" (97). Running across Queen Street to meet Charis and Tony, Roz is "conscious of a dozen shadowy forms, out there on the sidewalk, huddled cloth-covered shapes, undernourished red eyes sizing her up, calculating whether she's good for a touch" (98). These encounters establish the city as a "place in which the female is powerless" and reveal a production of a female self that sharply contrasts with the fearless *femme fatale* (Grace 207). Paying attention to the "rules and structures which assign people to positions within a script," Sharon Marcus argues that a "gendered grammar of violence" assigns women as "*subjects of fear*" which "precipitates all violence and agency outside of its subject" and "entails a complete identification of a vulnerable, sexualized body with the self" (392-394; emphasis in original).

The View From Above

Just as the three protagonists define themselves primarily as victims in the city, they are continually engaged in acts of transcendence and separation of the city-space. In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart cites what Phillip Fisher has called "democratic space," which refers to the space "immediately in front of our line of perception rather than the space above us, occupied by an authoritative and transcendent architecture; or the space at our feet to which we condescend; or the space behind us, invisible and threatening" (107). Continually, the three protagonists engage in practices of transcending and distancing the city, avoiding the 'democratic' space of the city. Against the transcendent subject who looks down on the city, containing and miniaturising it, de Certeau privileges the *wandersmännner* who, down below, "follows the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' without being able to read it" (93).

Looking out her window on the Island across the lake, Charis marvels at the view of the safely-distanced city:

on the mist the city floats, tower and tower and tower and spire, the glass walls of different colours, black silver, green, copper, catching the light and throwing it back, tenderly at this hour. From here on the Island, the city is mysterious, like a mirage, like the cover on a book of science fiction. A paperback. It's like this at sunset too, when the sky turns burnt orange and then the crimson of inner space, and then indigo, and the lights in the many windows change the darkness to gauze; and then at night the neon shows up against the sky and gives off a glow, like an amusement park or something safely on fire. The only time Charis doesn't care to look at the city is noon, in the full glare of the day. It's too clear-cut, too brash and assertive. It juts, it pushes. It's just girders then, and slabs of concrete. Charis would rather look at the city than go there, even at dusk. Once she's in it she can no longer see it; or she sees it only in detail, and it becomes harsher, pockmarked, crisscrossed with grids, like a microscopic photograph of skin . . . (43)

Similarly, Tony is more comfortable walking through Chinatown where she feels that she is the right height. In her basement, she constructs a three-dimensional model of Europe and the Mediterranean, with plasticine lakes and mountain ranges made out of flour-and-salt paste, to reconstruct battles of history. With different spices representing armies, tribes and nations, Tony uses her map "over and over, adding and subtracting canals, removing marshes, altering coastlines, building and unbuilding roads and bridges and towns and cities. . . . Right now it's set up for the tenth century: the day of Otto the Red's fateful battle, to be exact" (111). In this ritual of miniaturisation only Tony can "see the world from above" (112). Roz looks down from her top-floor presidential office on the lake, the marina, and Charis's house on the Island from one window; looking north, she surveys the university, picturing Tony's turreted house behind it: "[s]een from the air the three of them form a triangle, with Roz as their apex" (289-290). The distancing of city-space functions allegorically to represent the distancing of the *femme fatale* from pure, saintly femininity and, in a similar act of transcendence, objects the other.

The Space Between Self and Other

Just as the innocent female defines her 'self' as vulnerable to the carnivalesque of the city, a potential victim of those faceless, huddled figures, she sees her body and her

'self' as distinct from that of the *femme fatale*. Charis makes this connection literal in her fear of breathing in the contaminating matter of Zenia. Thinking that "the body may be the home of the soul and the pathway of the spirit, but it is also perversity, the stubborn resistance, the malign contagion of the material world," Charis considers that "[h]aving a body, being in the body, is like being roped to a sick cat" (200). Charis marvels over Billy's impermeability describing herself as "a screen door an open one at that, and everything blows right through" (212). Her sense of permeability translates into a concern about the edges and boundaries of her body and a fear that she will be contaminated by the germs and particles of others:

Every single molecule that Charis is taking into her lungs has been sucked in and out of the lungs of countless thousands of many people, many times. Come to that, every single molecule in her body has once been part of someone else's body, of the bodies of many others, going back and back, and then past human beings, all the way to the dinosaurs, all the way to the first planktons. . . . We are all a part of everybody else, she muses. . . . But then Charis has an unpleasant idea. If everyone is part of everyone else, then she herself is a part of Zenia. Or the other way around. Zenia may be what she's breathing in. The part of Zenia that went up in smoke that is. (55-56)

Charis's desire to keep Zenia sealed off from her body points to the energy involved in establishing the borders of the self. According to Stewart, the body "presents the paradox of contained and container at once" and as a bounded entity, the body's boundaries "can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious" (104). In Lacanian terms, "erotogenic" zones of the body are "those areas where there are cuts and gaps on the body's surface - the lips, the anus, the tip of the penis, the slit formed by the eyelids;" for Lacan "these cuts or apertures on the surfaces of the body allow the sense of 'edges', borders, or margins by differentiating the body from the organic functions associated with such apertures" (Ibid.). Doane stresses that the *femme fatale* "is an ambivalent figure because she is not the subject of power but its carrier (the connotations of disease are appropriate here)" (*Femmes* 2). Keeping the body contained and closed off from traces of corporeal Zenia, signifies the *femme fatale* as the truly abject, taboo corporeal material. Drawing on Kristeva's 'abjection', Butler defines this safeguarding of inner and outer as an excreting process in which "Others become shit" (*Gender* 134).

The women repeatedly work to separate Zenia-ness from their selves and the trope of containment attaches to the *femme fatale* so that she functions in the same way the names 'Karen' and 'Tnomerf Ynot' do for Charis and Tony - as a receptacle for the waste material in a practice of good femininity. Consolidating her function as a container for 'waste' material, twice in the text Zenia is (ostensibly) reduced to an urn; but Zenia is also metonymically fabricated as a prosthetic device. Tony declares that she "will be Zenia's right hand because Zenia is certainly Tony's left one" and it is Tony's left hand that occupies the subjectivity of Tnomerf Ynot, the "taller, stronger, more daring" side of Tony (169, 137). Similarly, stepping into Zenia's body forces Charis to recognise Karen, the side of her that is powerful, sexual and self-affirming. When Zenia/Karen "blends into her body," Charis desires and "instead of ministering to [Billy] she wants something back" (266-267). In Roz's case, Zenia is her mouthpiece; when Zenia exclaims "*Fuck the Third World! I'm tired of it!*" Roz, confined to 'liberal white feminist guilt', responds: "*Oh Zenia, you don't mean that!*", but she "had felt an answering beat, in herself. A sort of echo, an urge to go that fast, be that loose, that greedy, herself, too" (98). If Tony, Roz and Charis are good, self-effacing and nurturing, then it is because they have their 'others' and their 'prosthetic devices' to do their evilness for them.

Public Self /Private Self

Removing responsibility from each protagonist's male partner and confirming the home-as-haven myth, the *femme fatale* figure becomes, in Foucault's terms, "a kind of discursive orthopedics," supporting an idealised image of heterosexual monogamy (*History* 311). In this construction, the private/public split is invoked so that private and domestic relationships are beyond scrutiny and the private is esteemed as an otherwise safe place until invaded by the *femme fatale*. The public, seductive and corrupting 'other' woman arises out of the narratives of nurturing, matriarchal domesticity. Zenia transforms the space of the home into a war zone and into a

fortress that excludes others. The tower of Tony's house looks "warm and cheerful and safe" but as Tony thinks "towers have other uses. She could empty boiling water out the left-hand window, get a dead hit on anyone standing at the front door. Such as West and Zenia" (189). After the 'invasion' of Zenia, Roz's home life intensifies into "a maze of snares and booby traps" as it marks the beginning of skirmishes, deceits and betrayals in Charis's island house (351).

The disruption of the harmonious home is seen as an external pressure rather than one that erupts from inside the home, a point of view which posits a "a rigid dichotomy between the internal and external such that violence is imagined as coming to the subject entirely from the outside," and reinforces "a retrograde stereotype of the female as a purely passive victim" (Leys 168). The notion of an essentially benevolent home has long concealed asymmetrical and abusive relationships between couples and between parent and child as the childhood narratives of Tony and Charis, in particular, clearly expose.

Because the demise of the family is attributed to an external force, the men in the text are blameless. Tony cannot hold West responsible for leaving her for more than a year because being seduced by Zenia is equivalent to being "run over by a truck" (190), or, as she explains to Charis, like being put under a spell (281). West is 'zombified' twice by Zenia and left looking "a light greenish grey" (190) and "sucked dry of his will" (176). Roz's husband Mitch is similarly rendered colourless and bloodless after Zenia deserts him: "looking like an empty sack . . . his skin is grey . . . his flesh is loose, his face is starting to cave in" (378). For Charis, Zenia takes on the image of the weasel: picking up one of her dead hens from the ground she finds its throat slit and thinks "it must have been a weasel," only to find the bread knife in the yard insinuating Zenia as the culprit. Charis's grandmother taught her that weasels come out at night and they "bite the chickens in the neck and suck out their blood. . . . Karen imagined them, long, thin animals like snakes, cold and silent,

slithering in through the walls, their mouths open, their sharp fangs ready, their eyes shining and vicious” (246).

Imagined as man-eating vampire and weasel, the metaphors attached to Zenia betray anxieties about female sexuality. The vampire in feminist theory often fills in for lesbian or queer sexuality, but as Sue-Ellen Case points out: “the vampire is subjected to the familiar mode of ‘seduced and abandoned,’ or the ‘recreational use of the lesbian,’ for while such heterosexist feminist discourse flirts with her, it ultimately double-crosses her with the hegemonic notion of ‘woman,’ reinscribing ‘her’ in the generational model and making horrible what must not be seductive” (380). There is a case to be made, however, for aligning the vampire with a “hegemonic” notion of Woman. Creed, for example, installs the double bind of vampire/lesbian as a longstanding conception of femininity, arguing that femininity “has been variously depicted as narcissistic, sex fiend, creature, tomboy, vampire, maneater, child, nun, virgin. One does not need a specific kind of body to become - or to be seen as - a lesbian. All female bodies represent the threat or potential - depending on how you see it - of lesbianism” (“Lesbian” 87).

More important for a consideration of the *femme fatale* is the threat of a vampiric, man-eating desire and how this desire can be read across female bodies, queer or not, as a projection of fears about the voracious and devouring sexuality of woman. Along with the mandrake, vampire and bat, Grosz points to the fascination with the praying mantis and the black widow, equating female sexuality with animality and death for masculine subjects (“Animal” 278). Baudelaire’s revulsion toward feminine sexuality is expressed in “Black Venus” when a woman ‘with strawberry lips’ is ‘like a snake on red hot coals’ and quickly alters, as Allen maps out, “in a single moment after making love to the poet from warm, seductive, voluptuous body, into a ‘slimy rotten wineskin, full of pus’/ ‘the cold ruins of a skeleton’” (76). While Baudelaire’s revulsion is directed at an orgasmic female body, the animality of Zenia functions more as “an apt representation of the predatory and devouring female

lover, who ingests and incorporates her mate, castrating or killing him in the process. The *femme fatale* writ small” (Grosz “Animal” 282). As undead vampire, Zenia signals “the emblematic fear within Gothic fantasy that something dead and buried might not be dead” (Howells 63). The second and third deaths and burials of Zenia force a recognition of how she enacts, not as Lacan would have it, an end of mourning, but rather the continual separation of the polluting corpse/abject from the self (Bronfen 294). Furthermore, Zenia’s status as revenant marks her as always-already dead and therefore potentially ‘never-was’: the *femme fatale* as phantasm.

Acknowledging the fantasy of an essentially evil identity embodied and projected onto Zenia means that Tony, Roz and Charis must recognise how they draw power from her as she forces them to transform their lives and relationships with men (Perrakis 152). The *femme fatale* is used by the women to punish or get rid of their erring male partners and overturn the complacency of their domestic spaces (Bouson, “Slipping” 161; Jermyn 256). Tony recognises her complicity: “people like Zenia can never step through your doorway . . . unless you invite them” (114). Zenia is the model of femininity that feeds each woman’s career: Tony’s next book is to be about Zenia-like warriors; Roz’s new line of cosmetics is to be launched in a campaign of river-crossing *femmes fatales* appearing “seductive . . . but challenging too, a sort of meet-your-destiny stare;” and Chris’s brand of religion depends on its Jezebels (101).

Adams’s contention that “psychoanalytic theory treats the theory of patriarchy, with its identities of victor and victim, as a fantasy par excellence” (231) is pertinent here because Atwood repudiates the installation of Woman as victim by continually signalling that role’s well-rehearsed staging. Butler maintains that the “tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions” (*Gender* 140). Roz, Tony and Charis have certainly honed their performances of innocence and victimhood in relation to Zenia, underscoring, as Elspeth Probyn recognises, that:

“the past is that which lifelessly mirrors the present, or explains it to itself, or is served up in narratives that encourage a common tale of suffering” (*Outside* 118).

The emphasis on the performance of passive, feminine victimhood points to the self-assertive potential in presenting oneself as a model of credible and stereotypical female subjectivity. While Zenia sneers: “[f]emale whining. I hate it really” (132), it is she who most effectively “feigns powerlessness in order to wield power” (Deer 113). Tony realises: “it wasn’t fear through which Zenia had stolen West. Not a show of strength. On the contrary, it was a show of weakness. The ultimate weapon” (189). Similarly, Roz recognises the irresistibility of Zenia for Mitch as a ‘damsel in distress,’ just as it is Zenia’s victim-routine that manipulates Charis. Heavily implicated in the act of feminine victimhood is the performance of active, powerful and protective masculinity hinging as it does on an essentially passive and docile woman.

Atwood infers that women will keep playing the victim so long as men persist with a hero role; so long as men are unable to accept powerful women, the collusion will continue. In terms of sexuality, this means that an active desire is always-already secured by masculine subjects or *femmes fatales* and prohibited for ‘good’ and ‘ordinary’ woman. From the beginning, Mitch makes clear to Roz that “there were jumpers and jumpees, kissers and kissees, and he was to be the former and she the latter” (312). Roz continually produces a mode of femininity complementary to Mitch’s active and virile manhood. She laments that being “a woman with power” means with Mitch “she has to diminish herself, pretend she’s smaller than she is, apologise for her success” (351). While male historians think Tony is “invading their territory, and should leave their spears, arrows, catapults, lances, swords, guns, planes and bombs alone” (21-22), Tony hides this invasive and improper power from West because he “likes to think of her as kind and beneficent. And forgiving, of course” (14). When Charis is late for the ferry and work because of Billy she contemplates: “What can I tell him then? *I have to work or else we don’t eat?* That

doesn't go over too well: he thinks it's a criticism of him because he doesn't have a job and then he sulks. He prefers to believe that she's like a lily of the field; that she neither toils nor spins; that bacon and coffee are simply produced by her, like leaves from a tree" (217).

Unable to assert themselves in their domestic relationships, or to even consider West's, Billy's and Mitch's guilt and mistreatment of them, means that blame (and death) always gets attributed to the *femme fatale*, to the feared and loathed 'other' woman. Just as the will to categorise, separate and delineate spaces of selves informs the divide between innocent, passive femininity and the *femme fatale*, the separation of a private and public self, or an internal and external self, means that the powerful self is hidden in private domesticity where women are still expected to perform a nurturing and self-effacing role. Joan Riviere established that womanliness "could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it" (38).

Opening Spaces for Resistance

Riviere's analysis of womanliness as masquerade has led to an opening up of spaces for resistance and agency. Doane demonstrates how the 'putting on' of excessive femininity marks its inauthenticity and, more importantly, flags the possibility of 'taking off' and re-scripting fixed feminine identities and performances (*Femmes*). Bordo has called hysteria, multiple personality disorder and agoraphobia - all of which pertain to the female subjects that Atwood has written - "pathologies of female 'protest' "(95). Bordo considers the limited protest value in what amounts to painful and sometimes life-threatening disorders, but adds that they are "consistent with predominant notions of femininity" (96). These pathologies of femininity need to be seen as the production of a self that is formulated in reference to a gendered, classed or sexualised other. Following Foucault, power is not a thing to be possessed

and held by one particular group but is a practice that produces particular subject positions (*History* 134-136). In keeping with a textual criticism that attempts to locate the subversive power that emanates, as Foucault argues, from the “bottom up,” the protagonists of Atwood’s text cannot be so easily diagnosed, although they come close to being pathologised in their agoraphobic, hyper-domesticity, and in their paranoia and projection of Zenia as absolute ‘other’. The postmodern subject provides a theoretical site for resisting dominant discourse “precisely by being multiple and contradictory - by having too much detail for any one discourse to adequately fix and contain. . . . [T]he potentially transformatory power of the postmodern subject lies precisely in the possibility for *self*-representation, for counter-narratives that will challenge the dominant discourse in which they find themselves” (Caminero-Santangelo, “Multiple” 84).

Emphasising the counter-narratives that operate within ideology, and the power of self-presentation, Caminero-Santangelo gestures towards the modality of power in both *Alias Grace* and *The Robber Bride*. The solution to gender essentialism does not lie in the demands of Paula and Erin, Roz’s twin daughters, that murderers in every story should always be women, nor do women have to be “Zenia-like vandals when they exercise power” (Bloom and Makowsky 177). The power of Zenia has a limited and contained effect, and like other ‘pathologies of female protest’ is too often self-destructive. Similarly, the younger generation - the twins and Charis’s daughter Augusta - have, as Tony observes, “none of the timidity that used to be so built in, for women,” but Tony also notes “Augusta is faintly chilling” and the twins have become “gigantic, and also careless” (402). The focus on cleanly delineated and differentiated generations of women points to some of the problems in theoretical feminist debates whereby some ‘other’ is continually excluded. In the new generation, there is, perhaps, a repression of the ‘ordinary’, ‘domestic’ woman. But, as much as the futility of identity is revealed in its violent exclusions and repressive drives, Atwood does not diminish the meaning and tactical politics of community and identity in these women’s lives. She does, however, emphasise the

empowering possibilities of rewriting their “common tales of suffering,” to use Probyn’s term, in recognising their performances as innocent victims, and their scapegoating of the ‘other woman’.

Roz, Tony and Charis are forced to reconsider their fixed selves as perpetually good, innocent and nurturing, with Zenia filling in as the evil, guilty and parasitical: “the old dichotomies can be exploded; one cannot choose either good or evil, or indeed, decide which is good or which is evil” (Bloom and Makowsky 177). An embodiment of power and female subjectivity that does not rely on the exclusion of otherness or the restrictive implacability of dichotomies is envisaged in *The Robber Bride*. Spivak continually presses us to acknowledge and ask ourselves: “Who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me?” (cited in Showalter “A Criticism” 348). Atwood likewise asks that we reflect on our positions and productions as gendered, ideologically-embodied subjects.

4 The Woman Writer and the *Femme Fatale*

Alongside modernist visual representations of the *femme fatale* was an equally fearful and loathsome depiction of female writers voiced by modernist writers such as Baudelaire. Conjured in *Fleurs du Mal* poems such as “The Vampire,” “Black Venus,” and “Condemned Women,” Baudelaire’s “complete faith in the ominous reality of the *femme fatale*,” defined, in particular, the writer George Sand as a salient example of the dreadful and deceitful woman (Allen 76). Through infamous declarations such as Joyce’s congratulations to T.S. Eliot for ending the “idea of poetry for the ladies,” Hawthorne’s scathing attack on that “mob of women scribblers,” and Hemingway’s ridiculing of Stein, Lowell and other women modernists, emerges a disquieting and fearful attitude towards female authority; an attitude that quite often, had the desired, conservative effect of erasing women writers from the canon (Gilbert and Gubar, *The War* 156, 151, 142).

The association of the pen with the penis has been the theoretical explanation of the demonisation of castrating women writers. While Gilbert and Gubar have emphasised the anxiety women writers from the eighteenth and nineteenth century may have felt in their appropriation of the phallus/pen, critics such as Kathryn King underscore the pleasure and the power women often expressed in their ‘penmanship’ and creativity that resided outside the womb (78). Atwood claims that “[a]ny kind of strength or power, creative or otherwise,” displayed by a woman turns her into “a witch, a Medusa, a destructive, powerful, scary monster” and catalogues the various personas attributed to her: “Margaret the Medusa, Margaret the Man-eater, Margaret the power-hungry Hitler, with her megalomaniac plans to take over the entire field of Canadian Literature” (*Second* 225). While Gloria Anzaldúa has suggested that for

women, “writing is like drawing blood from the body in an incessant flow,” it may well be that the blood she draws from is, imaginatively, that of man: the woman writer as vampire, *femme fatale*, castatrice (cited in Curti 117). The fear of women writers implies the automatic branding of any women with power as *femme fatale*, confirming her status, like Zenia, as always-already dead, as phantasmatic. Arnold Davidson submits that with her name “running from Z to A”, Zenia, as the transgressive woman, is a “reversed allegory for writing itself” (5), and points to Atwood’s engagement with the problem of female authorship. The *femme fatale* becomes a trope for speaking about the woman writer.

While critics such as Barbara Rigney, Fiona Sparrow and Lorna Irvine have emphasised Atwood’s intertextual relationship with her literary ‘foremothers’, and particularly Susanna Moodie, this inheritance is marked by ambivalence. Maggie Tulliver’s desire in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* is to rewrite the endings “to avenge Rebecca and Flora Mac-Ivor, and Minna and all the rest of the dark, unhappy ones” (433). Clearly, Atwood is working with a heritage of *femmes fatales* - women who possessed an active desire and gaze and who defied the inscription of “Angel-in-the-House” - and who were accordingly ‘written off’. Zenia and Tony’s mother, Anthea, come from a long line of Jezebels, Theophanos and Dame Giraudes and both wind up like their ‘foremothers’. As Tony laments: “all they could think of to do, in those days, with women like her: throw them into wells, or off steep cliffs or parapets - some unrelenting vertical and watch them splatter” (464). That Atwood narratively produces the same ending in her texts would appear conservative, but Atwood’s narrative design advances, in a postmodern turn, a self-conscious disruption from a formulaic continuum of a ‘female tradition’ of writing. Ann Jones describes the dilemma: “[f]ive years ago in a women’s literature seminar, a student depressed by *The Awakening*, *The House of Mirth*, and *The Bell Jar*, complained: ‘Isn’t there anything a woman can do but kill herself?’ To lighten the mood I quipped, ‘She can always kill somebody else’ ” (xv). Setting up a dichotomy between murderous *femme fatales* and drowning, sleeping beauties, ‘women’s

writing' is therefore reduced to 'correcting' the fluctuation of female subjectivity between these two poles.

In interviews, Atwood has forcefully asserted her resistance to a 'woman's writing' by continually drawing attention to the difficulties of defining feminism, an *écriture féminine* and indeed 'Woman'. According to Bouson, Atwood is "leery of 'people telling people what they have to write,' and she feels that it would be a mistake to impose 'biological strait jackets' on women writers by arguing that only those writers who have a style that is considered to be 'feminine or female' are 'real women writers' (*Brutal* 4). Atwood claims: "I'm against ghettoization of anybody" and "that kind of determinism that says because you are *this*, thou shalt be so - you know, because you have a womb, your style has to have a hole in the middle of it" (*Ibid.*). Atwood's stance may overlook the contextual and counter-phallogocentric possibilities in Cixous's appeal to work against the authority of the rational by writing the body, but Atwood's wariness towards an *écriture féminine* can be understood in the terms Butler identifies: "every oppositional discourse will produce its outside, an outside that risks becoming installed as its non-signifying inscriptional space" (*Bodies* 52).

Peggy Phelan's cautious approach to 'visibility politics' is pertinent here. Following Foucault, Phelan states: "[v]isibility is a trap. . . . it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession" (6-7). The assumptions are that if "one's mimetic likeness is not represented, one is not addressed" and that "increased visibility equals power" (Phelan 7). The enduring hierarchy of presence over absence, as identified by Derrida, is sustained by visibility politics. But, in keeping with a fluid dynamic of subjectivity, resistance and power, Atwood's plot resolutions cannot be commandeered by a prescriptive, programmatic convention or project. Postmodern women writers "do not merely draft a feminine poetics or a feminine plot but rather turn the theme of their authorship into a metatextual concern" (Bronfen 405).

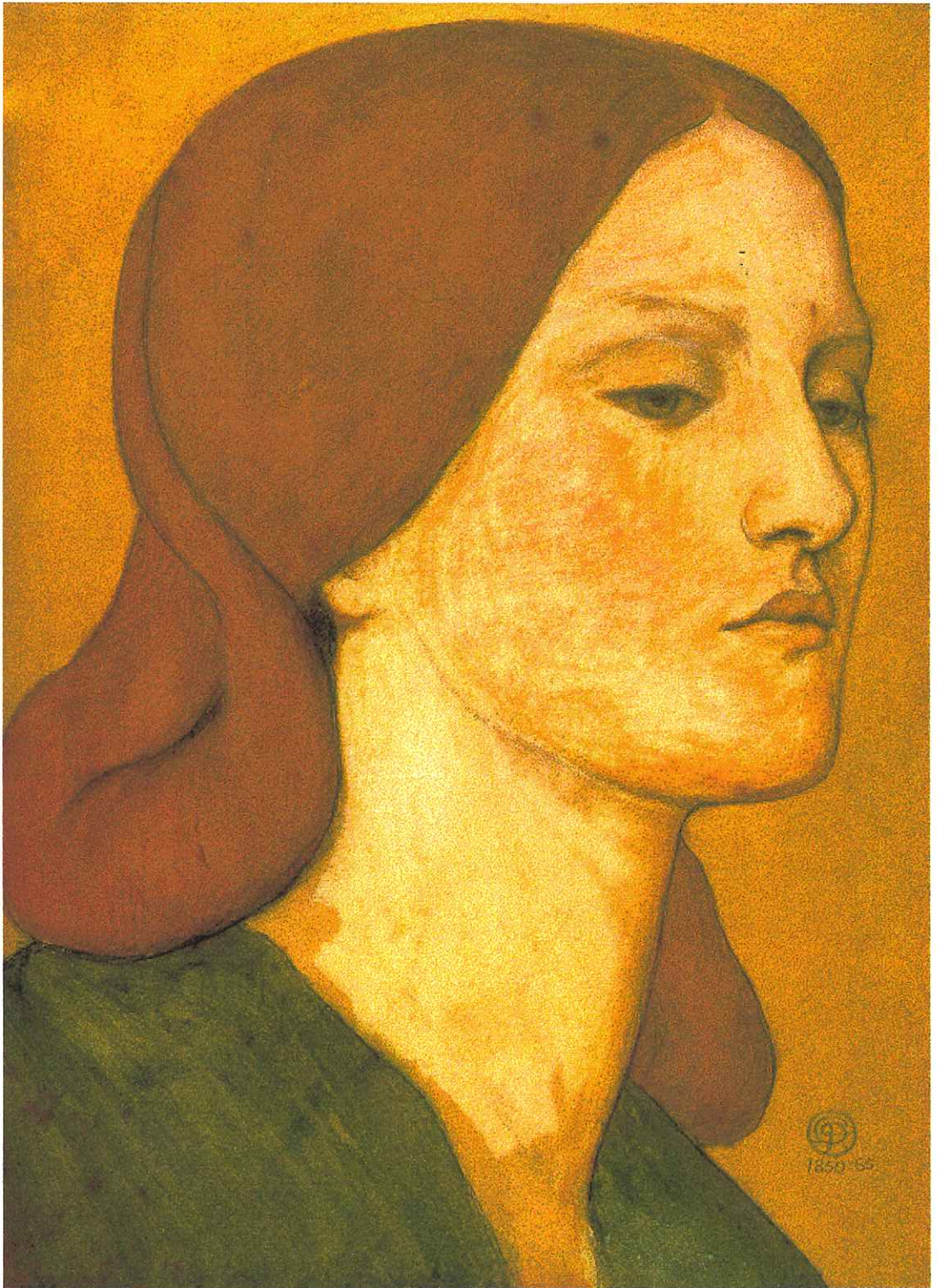
Moving “between an outward-directed didactic/mimetic motivation and the more inward-directed self-reflexivity,” Atwood’s postmodern metafiction keys into the impossibility of speaking for, or providing a mirror for, ‘Woman’, just as she makes dubious her status as a ‘woman writer’ (Hutcheon 140).

Rather than backing into a reductive and binary opposition, Atwood, like the “double-dealing” *femme fatale*, works between and against rigid boundaries and draws attention to the particular and individual to consider the heterogeneity of power, subjectivity and resistance. Traversing the front and back covers of *Alias Grace* is the iconic image of ‘beautiful’ death, Gabriel Dante Rossetti’s *Portrait of Elizabeth Siddal*. Bronfen describes Lizzie Siddal, the model for late-Victorian, Pre-Raphaelite artists, as the “beautiful figure of *melancholia*, of feminine beauty signed by death, in the liminality between life and death” (170). Posing for the artist John Everett Millais as a drowning Ophelia, Siddal was left in a tub of cold water for hours until, it is alleged, she caught pneumonia. Overdosing on laudanum she finally attained the ultimate image of the white, virginal ‘sleeping beauty,’ affirming what Edgar Allen Poe has lamented: “the death, then, of a beautiful woman, is unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” (epigraph in Chapter IX, *Alias* 332).

Atwood unmistakably interacts with this image of white, virginal and deathly femininity to bear in mind, as Simon remarks, “that such configurations are banal does not rob them of their power” (424-425). Craig Owens has argued that stereotypes “treat the body as an object to be held in a position of subservience, submission; they disavow agency, dismantle the body as a locus of action” (194). Mary Whitney and Mrs. Marks qualify as the stereotype of fallen, innocent woman who, in death, is aestheticised as a vision of serenity and beauty. After years of weakness against a tyrannical husband, in death Grace’s mother looks “pale and delicate, like a spring flower” (139). Mary Whitney “was buried in her best nightdress, and she didn’t look dead in the least, but only asleep and very pale; and

laid out all in white like that, she was just like a bride” (229). Grace resists this ‘ending’ admitting: “I had a rage in my heart for many years, against Mary Whitney and especially Nancy Montgomery; against the two of them both, for letting themselves be done to death in the way that they did, and for leaving me behind with the full weight of it” (531-532).

The death of the real-life Lizzie Siddal and the textual deaths of the characters of Grace’s mother, Mary Whitney and Nancy Montgomery offer a complex and irreducible scheme of feminine interaction with discursive power and representations of femininity. The ‘killing off’ of Mary Whitney makes literal the stereotype of ‘punished’ fallen women and in this instance serves as a reminder of the ‘real’ victims. Given that Atwood based the story of Mary’s death on archival material, she personalises stereotyped femininity, moving from a totalising image of femininity to particular, local, untold stories. Both Zenia and Grace will remain, despite their ostensible ‘endings’ (dead or domesticated), beyond the limits of representation. Reading beyond the ending, to use DuPlessis’s phrase, defies closure: Mary ‘rises’ from the dead, Zenia ‘bursts’ once again from the crematory urn in the final pages of the text and Grace is provided with the possibility of escape from domesticity by the mysterious appearance of Jeremiah in the closing of her narrative. The openness of the textual frames provides an antidote to a modernist project of aestheticising and petrifying female ‘still-lives’. Atwood, however, does not abandon the theme of the ‘death of the maiden’ nor does she exclude the terrorising figure of the *femme fatale* from her textual practice but, rather, installs the model attaching femininity to death and abjectivity in order to critique it and to reveal how, as a woman writer, she is left behind, like Grace, with the “full weight” of their deaths.



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Portrait of Elizabeth Siddal*, 1850-65
Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge



John Everett Millais, *Ophelia* 1851-1852,
Tate Gallery, London.

Conclusion

The *femme fatale* offers a theoretical model for conceiving postmodern and poststructuralist forms of subjectivity and power. The *femme fatale* cannot be known, fixed, pathologised and colonised; strategic resistance and coalitions are waged by her and against her. There is, however, an ‘other’ discourse, an ‘outside’, which the image of the *femme fatale* addresses. Caminero-Santangelo argues that “[f]or postmodernist writers - especially feminist writers - who want to effect real social change in whatever form, the prospect of speaking to an audience of a privileged few would seem bleak indeed” (“Moving” 21). Recognising a “complicity with mass culture, along with an understanding that only within this arena can effective resistance be waged,” (Ibid. 22), *Alias Grace* and *The Robber Bride* generically move between different popular genres such as the detective fiction, Gothic, soap opera and melodrama and ‘speak’ to both academic and ‘ordinary’ audiences. The popularity of the *femme fatale* is asserted by Roz’s appetite for “trashy thrillers” with their “sex killings” (72). Tony quietly cheers both Zenia and her mother, “*On! On!*”, indicating both the pleasure of her gaze and the empowering possibilities engendered by an image of beautiful and dangerous femininity (137).

Susan M. Squier argues “the modern woman writer must articulate the experiences and emotions of the ordinary women who swell the city streets” (102). Atwood’s texts “reflect a belief in the power of fictions to forge escape routes” for such ‘ordinary’ women (Goldman 6). The retreat from the city to utopian spaces advanced by Charis, only replaces one space with another and does little to work within and against the ideological constraints in which subjects are located. An ‘escape route’ might be found by loosening the female self from being either an essentially powerless and innocent victim to a godlike patriarchy or an evil *femme*

fatale. Much feminist criticism, as Judith Newton argues, “assumes the existence of unequal gender-based relations of power,” but also

implicitly constructs those relations in such a way as to render them tragic - unchanging, universal, and monolithically imposed . . . [O]ur own constructions of history might themselves be called patriarchal. Insofar as our constructions of history suggest that gender relations do not change, they distance us from a sense of their social construction and return us to a sense of their inevitability and tragic essentiality. (cited in Dopp 43)

Atwood deflates the monolith of patriarchal oppression, considering how women might participate in their own and others’ victimisation, but, before lapsing into a post-feminist, liberal humanist stance, the cultural and historical framework of passive and abject femininity needs to be accounted for and countered. To believe as Charis does, that just by speaking positive thoughts, power and evil go away, strikes a chord with DuPlessis’s rejoinder that language “doesn’t change things, people do” (“For” 287). A facile celebration of strategic resistance should not lead to a patronising, “largesse” mode of ‘feminine’ resistance and what effectively amounts to “choicoisie,” the celebration of a multitude of lifestyle choices in postmodern capitalism (Probyn, “New Trad” 15). A willingness to conceive of the mobility of power and identity should not revert to a conservation of an ideal, liberal-capitalist subject - free-willed and ideologically-disembodied. Atwood’s postfeminist ‘tendencies’ foster an anti-essentialising and anti-totalising politics of ‘Woman’ and ‘Feminism’, but still mark the cultural and ideological contexts in which Woman is defined, essentialised and located (*Second* 225).

The precursive, canonical Canadian woman writer, Susanna Moodie, whose *Roughing in the Bush; or, Life in Canada* (1852) and *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush* (1853), provided Atwood with the story of Grace Marks. Atwood, ironically, imparts an unflattering view of Susanna Moodie in *Alias Grace* describing her as a “beetle” and “a literary lady” who, “like all literary ladies and indeed like the sex in general,” is inclined to “embroider” (416, 223). Evoking a long-standing stereotype of ‘crafty’ femininity and especially of ‘literary ladies’, Atwood also implicates her ‘self’ as a fabricator, particularly of the history of Grace Marks. This self-reflexivity



admits the limited power of the writer and can be read as a deflation of an elitist, all-knowing and transcendent artist pose. If Atwood is neither a *femme fatale*, a Medusa nor a Man-Eater, then it would also appear that her status as the 'Great Canadian Writer' is likened to craftwork.

Disrupting a hierarchy of writing over 'craftiness', sewing and quilting are imbued with a potency not usually attributed them, signalling "an elevation of safe, feminine, domestic, craft" into a new "means of resistance" (Miller 282). Tony begins one of her lectures with "*Pick any strand and snip, and history becomes unravelled,*" musing that the "metaphor is of weaving or else of knitting, and of sewing scissors" and is shocking because of the "mix of domestic image and mass bloodshed" (3). Grace is prohibited from holding the sewing scissors while in therapy with Simon and ends her days quilting a Tree of Paradise with a border of entwined snakes. The removal of woman's domestic craft from connotations of 'safety' and 'domesticity' disputes a romanticising and essentialising 'feminine aesthetic'. Accordingly, Simon's mother appeals for him to invest in the new Sewing Machine which, she assures, will be a "good deal more help" to women than Lunatic Asylums, saving them "from many hours of monotonous toil and unceasing drudgery and would also be of great assistance to the poor seamstresses" (57). The subversion found in 'feminist aesthetics' remains mute and must not displace 'monstrous' speaking and writing acts. But, Atwood's metaphors of a 'feminine aesthetic' recall the modernist representation of the *femme fatale*: a safe and inviting veneer disguising a threatening and powerful practice. Once again, the hierarchy of outside and public over domestic and private forms of resistance is unsettled.

Quilting as an allegorical/bricolage practice that 'makes do' with scraps of material is a model for postmodern power and subjectivity. Martha Sharpe aligns Atwood's politics with Kristeva's "Woman's Time," which imagines a feminism that "expands and includes" (65). Kristeva uses the term "space-time" to advance what can be identified, crudely, as the preoccupations of first and second-wave feminisms with,

respectively, time and space. She insists that in a third generation or wave, feminisms should “be interwoven one with the other” (“Woman’s” 193, 209). Charis echoes Kristeva’s space-time: “there is a fold in time, like the way you fold the top bedsheet down to make a border, and if you stick a pin through at any spot, then the two pinholes are aligned . . . There’s nothing mysterious about it, any more than a backwash in a lake, or with harmony in music” (258). Grace similarly pictures an intertwining of subjectivities in her quilt:

three of the triangles in my Tree will be different. One will be white, from the petticoat I still have that was Mary Whitney’s; one will be faded yellowish, from the prison nightdress I begged as a keepsake when I left there. And the third will be a pale cotton, a pink and white floral, cut from the dress of Nancy’s that she had on the first day I was at Mr. Kinnear’s. . . . I will embroider around each one of them with red feather-stitching, to blend them in as part of the pattern. And so we will all be together. (534)

The trope of quilting fits in with a textual practice that engages with the faded, forgotten scraps of material history and blends the hard lines separating and monitoring boundaries of feminine selves which have polarised the *femme fatale* and the proper lady. Clément and Cixous warn that: “both the witch and the hysteric woman have a rebellious and conservative role at the same time” and they both “must disappear: the newly born woman may only impersonate them” (6). By interweaving “one with the other,” Atwood develops a mode of female subjectivity and an embodying of power that sutures and weaves difference, unravelling and weaving the threads of history and well-worn figures of femininity in order to make something new.

Female subjectivity cannot be pinned down, kept within a frame, reduced to a type or unified under a universalising feminist discourse. Lyotard employs a ‘sewing trope’ to consider a view of postmodernism that does not “prevent countless stories (minor and not so minor) from continuing to weave the fabric of everyday life” (31). The stories we have (been) told of Woman, as always-already dead, victim, mute, sleeping beauty, fallen, punished *femme fatale*, are countered by those ‘minor and not so minor stories’ that disrupt and disturb the cemented and grand narratives of femininity. Given that Atwood emphasises that women too employ, tell and enjoy

representations of the *femme fatale*, as well as those of the beautiful 'still-life', she continually asserts female agency in exploiting and participating in patriarchal constructions of feminine stereotypes. In *Alias Grace* and *The Robber Bride* the subversive moments of everyday life operate from within ideological and cultural frameworks and are modest, provisional and strategic; they cannot speak for all women but, rather, map out possible spaces for transformation - 'escape routes' - and illuminate the ongoing, contested and fluid dynamic of gender and power.

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