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"The desire of the woman which is for the desire of the man": Feminist readings in Austen and Atwood

Pringle, Mary M., Ph.D.
The University of North Dakota, 1994
"THE DESIRE OF THE WOMAN WHICH IS FOR THE DESIRE OF THE MAN"
FEMINIST READINGS IN AUSTEN AND ATWOOD

by

Mary M. Pringle
Master of Arts, University of North Dakota, 1983

A Dissertation
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1994
This dissertation, submitted by Mary M. Pringle in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

[Signed]

This dissertation meets the standards for appearance, conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

[Dean]

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For my daughters
and my son
ABSTRACT

Three novels by Jane Austen are compared to three novels by Margaret Atwood in the context of reading and writing as feminist activities. Anna G. Jónasdóttir's theoretical discussion of male authority supported by women's alienated love elaborates the apparent truth of W.B. Yeats's observation that "the desire of the woman . . . is for the desire of the man," the thematic link between the three essays which focus on women's concerns regarding love, maternity, and professionalism. Austen and Atwood are presented as early and late forms of a bright, coherent, middle-class female subjectivity that has remained remarkably coherent over two centuries and two continents.

Austen's Northanger Abbey and Atwood's Lady Oracle are compared as two metagothics. The female gothic is reread as a response to a world owned and managed by men, a world characterized by ugly secrets and selfish predators. In the comparison between Mansfield Park and The Edible Woman, the significance of women's potential, symbolic, and actual maternal functions is discussed in the context of woman as commodity. Persuasion and Life Before Man are compared as sites for the presentation of professionalism as an ascendant ideology allowing for both the advancement and control of the middle class.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to give pleasure to women. I have read and reread and gone deep into a body of work important to women in ways that will stimulate women, make them feel stronger, more incisive, more significant. (Male readers are already situated as voyeurs, which may or may not give them pleasure.)

The act of reading in its fullness is always an act of interpretation, an expedition through one's mental landscape, a landscape that is never passive, but always moving, re-forming, changing in shade and perspective. In my case, the interior terrain has been dominated for some time by the six novels I write about here, but although they are the occasion of writing, they are not the only or even the main subject--the dissertation is about reading and writing as a feminist.

A novel can never be read without a ready-made context: all the things I have known or experienced--my daily life in a white, middle-class, North Dakota big town; literary critics and linguists I have read; history as I know it; other novels; conversations with friends and others; movies;
magazines in doctors' offices, in my mailbox, and in the
grocery store checkout line; television; public radio—all
these assert themselves, some acting out allusive
intertextual dramas, others forming background and props,
others offering scripts. These connections between reading
and experience that become the experience of reading are
valuable in each mind, increasing in value as they are
written, recoded as symbols on paper, given shareable form.

My desire is to give my readings some of the appeal of
the novels themselves, that of turning the chaos of reality
into a familiar but stimulating respite from the daily work
of doing one's own interpretations. I would like to remake
my readers' ideas of what my text should be, to teach them
to see what I see, to share my motives and my amazements. I
might have liked more windows and more doors between the
three essays presented here and between them and the world
outside, but I am pleased for now with the results.

The three critical essays to follow focus on selected
writings by Jane Austen and Margaret Atwood more than on the
massive academic industries both authors, although rightly
considered popular, have generated. The feminist concepts
active here came to me mostly from my life outside of
literary analysis, so suffusing me as a reader that I could
not read the chosen novels without seeing them; but the
ideas were already present in the texts as well as in my
preoccupations.
The Middle-Class Worlds of Austen and Atwood

I chose to compare the works of Jane Austen and Margaret Atwood because they are so essentially similar, the voice over time of the intelligent English-speaking middle-class female consciousness. Both authors have been said to excel in the comedy of manners;¹ both write (best) about what they know: Austen, the country gentry of early 19th-century England; Atwood, the late 20th-century urban Ontario middle class. Most striking to me is the similarity between their narrators—their respective novelistic worlds are perceived by a bright, sensible, coherent subject who is completely confident in the correctness of her ethical voice, never deceived by the sentimental or the stereotypical. Both sets of narrators deal in irony to question the incomprehensible and prod the stupid, with an almost identical degree of subtlety, usually very funny, sometimes approaching shrillness or cruelty.

Atwood was praised by George Woodcock after the appearance of The Edible Woman as a highly perceptive social novelist who "has done, in her own way and for her own time and place, the same kind of thing as Jane Austen did for similar people a century ago" (99). Woodcock notes that Atwood is not another Austen; nor does he imagine that she would want to be one. My own view of authorship is that since writing is using language, one does not have much more choice about who one "is" as an author than one has about the dialect or language one speaks.
What amazes me is the continuity of voice and consciousness from one author to the other, a continuity that implies the unbroken transmission of cultural values over space and time. John Halperin, in his 1984 biography of Jane Austen (unpaginated front pages), gives Donald Greene's "partial pedigree" for her. Greene notes that "[h]er family's connections with nobility and even royalty, with the worlds of politics, learning, and high society from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, are remarkable, and Jane Austen was well aware of them;" yet, she is perceived by most of her audiences as representing the rather ordinary upper middle-class gentry. Tony Tanner makes the argument that "property and propriety" motivate Austen's social attitudes. He sees the concern with manners in her work as something much deeper than prescriptive etiquette. The respect for the rights of property that had created a relatively stable order in 18th-century England could not be counted on to keep at bay domestic forces similar to those that had sparked the French Revolution:

Exemplary conduct in manners and morals was necessary, not for religious reasons, nor primarily for aesthetic reasons. They had become a political necessity as essential as property to the maintenance of social order and peace in society. Property was a necessary, but not sufficient, basis for a stable and orderly society. Decorum, morality and good manners—in a word, 'propriety'—were equally indispensable. The
one without the other could prove helpless to prevent a possible revolution in society. This is one reason why Jane Austen constantly sought to establish and demonstrate what was the necessary proper conduct in all areas of social behavior, why she scrutinised so carefully any possible deviance from, or neglect of, true propriety—in her own writing as well as in the speech of her characters. To secure the proper relationship between property and propriety in her novels was thus not the wish-fulfilment [sic] of a genteel spinster but a matter of vital social—and political—importance. (18)

Richardson's Pamela (1740-41) had been an immensely popular indictment of aristocratic immorality and a vigorous affirmation that the superior moral action of any lower-class person made her (or him) a legitimate heir to the property of the less deserving. Austen, who began to write 50 years later, reflects the rising middle-class morality and sense of decorum that was to preserve the social order from the internal decay that had destroyed the French aristocracy. The power of this moral imperative was such that it has survived to Margaret Atwood's time and place, although her generation is almost certainly the last to have the authoritative voice inherited from Jane Austen. Atwood's generation was to see a massive social rebellion against some of the specific standards of morality that Austen approved, yet was able to retain the sense of moral
correctness, common sense, and common decency found in Austen's narrators, even as common sense and decency acquired new referents.

I like working with Austen and Atwood because they seem to me to be situated at the beginning and end of the history of their kind. The middle-class Man and Woman conceived in England over 200 years ago may soon be gone, replaced by global technopeople as strange to both Jane Austen and Margaret Atwood as the ancient Athenians or the precontact Inuit would be to either of them. The white, middle-class, English-speaking female consciousness that became possible in the later 18th century is probably almost impossible for my daughters and their contemporaries to sustain. Here I call upon the work of Nancy Armstrong and Alice Jardine in support of a claim that takes volumes to explain but is essentially offered here as a given. In Desire and Domestic Fiction, Armstrong takes the remarkable and well substantiated position

[F]irst, that sexuality is a cultural construct and as such has a history; second, that the written representations of the self allowed the modern individual to become an economic and psychological reality; and third, that the modern individual was first and foremost a woman. (8)

She argues that the history of British fiction must be linked to empowering the middle classes in England through the dissemination of a new female ideal, an ideal that began
to be cast abroad in 18th-century fiction about and by women. Challenging well established histories of the novel such as Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel*, Armstrong explicitly notes Watt’s inability to "account for Jane Austen" as a rationale for her revisions of literary history (7). Although Armstrong’s discussion begins more than thirty years before Austen’s birth with Richardson’s *Pamela*, Jane Austen’s stature is such that she is the starting point both in the history of the modern novel and in Armstrong’s history of a new female literary authority that "was indeed necessarily antecedent to . . . the way of life it represented" (9).

Armstrong’s discussions of the literary feminization of the British middle classes are a direct and straightforward assertion; Alice Jardine in *Gynesis* offers a more abstract discussion of the relationship between late 20th-century French feminist positions and those of their Anglo-American counterparts in the process of "[g]ynesis--the putting into discourse of 'women' or the 'feminine' as problematic" (236). Examining texts by men who have influenced feminist theory and literary practice, Jardine experienced, as well as disappointment,

Exhilaration, because I discovered that the differences between the male-written and female-written texts of modernity were not, after all, in their so-called "content," but in their *enunciation*; in their writing modes of discourse ("sentimental," ironic, scientific,
etc.); in their twisting of female obligatory connotations, of inherited genealogies of the feminine; in their haste or refusal to use the pronouns "I" or "we"; in their degree of willingness to gender those pronouns as female, in their adherence to or dissidence from feminism as a movement; in the tension between their desire to remain radical and their desire to be taken seriously as theorists and writers in what remains a male intellectual community; in the extent of their desire to prescribe what posture women should adopt toward the new configurations of women in modernity; in the intensity of their desire to privilege women as proto-postmodernists. (261)

Entry into the postmodern is arguably an end point for the history that begins with Jane Austen, an end point signalled by both changes in the idea of the novel as a literary form and in the broader cultural contexts of the white English-speaking middle class.

Like Jane Austen, Atwood was profoundly influenced by the female gothic (see Chapter II), but she is not a postmodern writer in the sense of creating a self-conscious pastiche from prior forms. Although Atwood has attempted to go beyond her middle-class experiences (in the novel Bodily Harm, for example), she is most successful when, like Austen, she incorporates social concerns only as they impinge on her personally. In her most recent novel, The Robber Bride, Atwood recalls the visitation to Canadian
women of American draft dodgers in the 1960s and documents the presence of homeless beggars on the streets of Toronto in the early 1990s economic recession through the perceptions of her characters. At the same time, she revives several of the gothic elements from *Lady Oracle*--a character with psychic powers; the unhappy mother at odds with both her own roots and with her daughter; the daughter drawn to the female relative rejected by the mother; doubling and splitting of characters; and a truly gothic villainess whose bizarreness is underscored by her being the product of common social conditions.

The awareness Atwood expresses in *The Robber Bride* of racial resentments directed toward a new nonwhite entrepreneurial class and of homosexual domesticity as an alternative to traditional households is also documentation of the end of the kind of monolithic, authoritative, white middle-class female consciousness she shares with Austen. The war theme in *Robber Bride* (one of the main female characters is a historian who studies battles) seems an early alarm that the feminization process marking the growth of the middle class is losing ground as its numbers dwindle.

Thus, I see Margaret Atwood as having a great deal in common with Jane Austen, the two being the product of an historical process powerful enough to reach over two centuries, carried across the Atlantic by Austen's compatriots and firmly planted in dominant North American culture. At the same time, Atwood's literary life has been
injected with the emergent energies of cultural, economic, and sexual changes that must challenge her authority; it is most unlikely that the next generation of novelists will produce another unified and confident white middle-class voice of any stature.

The Discipline of Feminism

Like the language they speak, women change over time in ways limited by their essential properties (the biological given that change so slowly as to seem constant) and by the influences they become part of (the cultural and geographic vicissitudes). Since I am not a natural scientist, I find the vicissitudes, the apparently infinite social variations on biological themes, most interesting. If, as Michel Foucault claimed, ² Man was invented in the 18th century, then Woman was too, and, as the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft and others attest, so were our present ideals of feminism. I would call Jane Austen, Margaret Atwood, and myself feminists in the tradition of Mary Wollstonecraft, emphasizing the similarities between women and men rather than the differences. Our agenda would foreground the demand that women's rights, talents, and concerns be socially acknowledged and rewarded to the same degree as those of men.³ The intense and fruitful discussions of women's differences from men and the specificity of women's writings, for example, that came to the fore of feminist theory in the 1970s and 80s are no more salient in Atwood
than in Austen. In fact, one of Atwood's favorite turns, the reversal of sex stereotypes, is more an interrogation of such discussions than a contribution to them. My conclusions in Chapter IV further underscore the Wollstonecraft-Austen-Atwood connection.

Not only was Mary Wollstonecraft not in a position 200 years ago, however, to realize how extremely complex such apparently simple matters as equal rights for women really are, the matters themselves have also greatly increased in complexity. Feminism as a discipline must now consider race, class, nation, history, technology, and all the corollaries generated by such considerations. Like Austen and Atwood, I write about what I know best, so my feminist discussions circulate around white, middle-class worries about work, maternity, and professionalism. How well any of this matches other ethnic, national, or class experiences is another discussion altogether, as is the relationship of Atwood as a postcolonial Canadian to the texts written by Austen in the heyday of British imperialism.

Women in the English-speaking world and their European counterparts have for the most part already attained most of what Wollstonecraft would have demanded or approved for them, yet they are still not economically or politically equal to men. Why? One theoretical work particularly supportive to me in what I am doing here appeared early in 1994, as I was in the final stage of writing the third essay. Anna G. Jónasdóttir, a Swedish feminist, in *Why*
Women Are Oppressed strikes many chords that resonate with my discussions of the Austen and Atwood texts. Theorizing the relationships between women and men rather than the forces that construct us as women or men, she argues, in brief:

prevailing social norms, accompanying us from birth and constantly in effect around and in us, say that men not only have the right to women's love, care, and devotion but also that they have the right to give vent to their need for women and the freedom to take for themselves. Women, on the other hand, have the right to give freely of themselves but have a very limited legitimate freedom to take for themselves. Thus men can continually appropriate significantly more of women's life force and capacity than they give back to women. Men can build themselves up as powerful social beings and continue to dominate women through their constant accumulation of the existential forces taken and received from women. If capital is accumulated alienated labor, male authority is accumulated alienated love. (26)

Although this exercise of the accumulation of authority begins in intimate male-female relationships, the pattern pervades all social spheres in which women are in contact with men. Jónasdóttir remarks, "To test my propositions empirically may seem difficult if not impossible; yet I do not think it is in principle more difficult than any other
empirical testing. ... [A]t present descriptions of reality in this area are more or less restricted to fiction" 25).

Reading Austen and Atwood

My readings of the novels of Austen and Atwood assume a continuity, a retrospective teleology regarding the directions taken by feminist concerns for women's education, rights, and opportunities over the two centuries marked by the two authors' lives. As brain power became more important than physical bulk, and a great number of social and economic activities changed, phased out, or came into being, women moved ineluctably into the intellectual and professional circles once closed to them and, of course, are still on the move.

Since I am regarding the period spanned by Austen and Atwood's lives as homogeneous in a number of ways, little of this paper is given to historical detail or interpretation; however, certain differences are important to carry along to the readings. For example, the notion of Mommy used in Chapter III was certainly different for women of Austen's circle than it is for me in the North American post-Leave It to Beaver late 20th century. Likewise, both the notion of the female gothic discussed in Chapter II and the selfhood/personhood distinction made in Chapter IV must be seen as having a history within the period defined by this study at the same time as they fit comfortably into a single long
historical moment one might call "The Age of the White English-Speaking Middle Class," which existed in the United Kingdom and its spheres of influence from roughly 1750 to 1968.4

I use the word "heroine," an honorable word, worth keeping because necessary. A heroine is not simply a hero of another gender. She is someone with a literary history quite different from that of the hero. Heroes are from a tradition that finds them making large gestures with their arms or horses or armies. Heroines invented by both male and female writers were mastering language, particularly the language of the unconscious, before Freud or Poe or Joyce--the oppressed taking notes, gathering information to be used later, psychology retorted in the 18th-century gothic. Heroines excelled at the epistolary form, one of the most direct origins of the modern novel.

"The Desire of the Woman Which is for the Desire of the Man"

The title of this dissertation is taken from notes by W.B. Yeats to his volume of poetry, The Wind Among the Reeds (1899). My first formulation of the question examined by Jónasdóttir in Why Women Are Oppressed came from Yeats's observation in the notes to an early poem, "He mourns for the Change that has come upon him and his Beloved, and longs for the End of the World." Discussing the Celtic (Freudian) imagery he uses in the poem, Yeats explains that the "hound with one red ear, following a deer with no horns" is an
image seen in old Celtic stories of "the desire of the man, and the desire of the woman 'which is for the desire of the man'." Yeats's use of quotation marks shows that the idea is not new to him, but from an unidentified earlier source, perhaps the Genesis account of the Fall. At the time I came upon this note, I was studying for a comprehensive exam on Yeats. As my energies turned toward feminist readings of novels, this phrase stayed with me, firmly lodged among the many vivid and memorable lines of Yeats's poetry. It seemed to have great explanatory power.

Yeats was speaking at a time right between Austen and Atwood of the complicated nature of sexuality for women as he knew them, women whose desires must always be mediated by social constraints and economic necessity to a much greater degree than those of a man, who by comparison was able to experience and express his sexuality in its immediacy. In the time compassed by Austen and Atwood, the women they represent have gone from desiring "the desire of the man," which in Austen's time, if it didn't ruin them, would give them a personhood in almost the only job available to respectable middle-class women (besides writing), to openly desiring man's power and privilege, not as a helpmeet but as an equal. This feminist initiative has created new images of desire, and as Atwood's Life Before Man shows, middle-class women have begun to experiment with unmediated desire, with career and erotic goals that are distinct. Yet, as Jónasdóttir shows, men still claim a
disproportionate amount of women's emotional energies as their due, expecting women to empower them by freely given affective support without in turn empowering women. Women are still willing to enter into unequal partnerships in order to attract and sustain "the desire of the man."

Situating the Dissertation

This dissertation explores three feminist themes, all in response to the matter of the "desire of the woman which is for the desire of the man." My first essay, in Chapter II, is much concerned with the literary forms of the novels compared, but a gradual slippage occurs toward viewing the novels as "descriptions of reality . . . restricted to fiction," so that by the end of the third essay in Chapter IV, I am treating the novelistic text as fodder for a quasi-sociological reading that voices an inchoate yet compelling concern with women and professionalism; other chapters, retrospectively, seem to have been infused by Jónasdóttir's theorizing of male-female relationships.5

Chapter II compares Jane Austen's Northanger Abbey (originally written 1798-99 and published in 1818 after her death) to Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle (her third novel, published in 1976). Both novels are metagothics, parodically incorporating gothic conventions that were already well established in writing for and by women (especially Ann Radcliffe) by the end of the 18th century and have persisted almost intact to this day. I reread the
female gothic as not only a literary expression of sexual curiosity, but also a broader curiosity about the world owned and managed by men, an anxious look into what appears to be a world of predators, full of ugly secrets. Although Austen and Atwood make light of gothic conventions and their readers/writers, they agree that there are any number of much sillier stories available to a young woman making her way in this world.

Chapter III, in what might be called an economic reading of literary texts, looks at Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) and Atwood's first novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969), observing how the maternal role is key in the commodification of the middle-class woman. Both novels direct attention to the ways in which relationships between men and women become identified as commercial exchanges in what even in Austen's time was already becoming a consumer culture driven by mass production and the quest for upward mobility. I explicitly identify the emotional energy leak theorized by Jónasdóttir as a function of women's actual and potential motherhood.

While the likenesses between the two authors make comparison both possible and significant, the differences between them make comparison interesting. For example, what could be the similarity between two novels beginning "Sir Walter Elliot of Kellynch-hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the baronetage" and "I don't know how I should live. I don't
know how anyone should live. All I know is how I do live. I live like a peeled snail"? Although *Persuasion* (1818) and *Life Before Man* (1979) have few formal characteristics in common, the two books address the same matters, or so I argue in Chapter IV. The two novels, each characterized by critics as a turn to a darker vision for its author, are examined for signs of things to come. I work at connecting the social realities that were the matrix for the authors' creation of verisimilitude, at thinking through the social givens that provided content. My preoccupation with the doctrines of professionalism as social control and as a matter of concern for women are already implicit in *Persuasion*, where Austen has written a parallel between the rewarded naval professionalism of Frederick Wentworth and the deserving domestic professionalism of the heroine Anne Elliot. *Life Before Man* encodes life for women to whom the professional mobility enjoyed outside the home by Austen's fictional male character is finally available in a postfeminist culture. Mary-T. Dombeck's *Dreams and Professional Personhood* lends specificity to my discussion with her analytical constructs of selfhood and personhood, a distinction not often made in Western culture. Making such a distinction seems the most direct way to call forth the ideologies of professionalism from the two novels.

Jane Austen's long history of critical acclaim and dissection is no secret. Some of the well recognized critical works from the past 50 years are listed in my
Bibliography. As Susan Morgan points out, "a continuing difficulty in interpreting Austen's fiction [is] how to place it historically and intellectually" (1). As a woman born in the 18th century, she did not have the kind of public education or life that could be traced and documented by scholars as formative. Considered by many the greatest novelist of the nineteenth century and the clearest progenitor of the modern novel, Austen made her work a monument to the power of the practices of reading and writing--reading in the inclusive sense of interpretation, writing as the creation of culture and ideals.

Margaret Atwood began to receive critical attention from almost her first moments of publication, becoming a local literary celebrity for her poetry by the age of 22. As she has noted, however, she is "not dead yet," and the great and definitive works on her, thankfully, cannot be written. She has nevertheless generated a thriving academic industry (of which some is recorded in my Bibliography) as well as having the honor of seeing her novels translated into at least twenty languages. Like Austen, she has a society of aficionados, but hers retains an academic following whereas the Jane Austen Society includes a great number of amateurs who often give their conferences a Trekkie-like air of celebration with costumes and impersonations of characters.

My place as a reader of Austen and Atwood is that of a fan, follower, and critical essayist. Like Atwood's
writings on Canadian literature, mine on hers and Jane
Austen's are informal, but, one hopes, informed. I offer
this dissertation to readers as a textual adventure with six
well known novels by two well known women and as a testimony
to the seriousness and the power of the act of reading. As
Roland Barthes demonstrated, reading is rewriting, and the
fascination Jane Austen and Margaret Atwood hold for their
middle-class audiences is not only the thrill of
recognition, but the always seductive invitation to be
rewritten, an adjustment that seems to strengthen the
continuity of culture and imagination that characterizes so
many readers' relationships with these authors.

The Experience of Theory

Because this dissertation is about reading and writing,
the text itself best demonstrates what I have to say. This
part of the text is a chance to stop and consciously reflect
upon a process that is finally too complex to describe in
total, but so common that the attempt could be deferred
without anxiety. My reading and writing habits were formed
twenty years ago when I studied linguistics as an
undergraduate. Linguistics was a great discovery for me.
Steeped in art, music, and experiential delights, I looked
into one odd system after another that might reveal the
order behind the busy chaos of thought. When I laid eyes
upon my first linguistics textbook, I knew I had found it.
Combining science with art, narrowness of method with the
infinity of language, linguistics had already become a literary tool in the writings of Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, and others of the famous Tel Quel group in France.

Structural linguistics operates by comparison without assigning value to particular elements of language as we do in the social uses of speech. In my reading, I still compare paragraphs as I learned to compare word pairs like 'pit' and 'bit'--the similarity between the two creates a paradigm and the difference reveals identity. For example, when the element "naval professional" surfaced in Persuasion and "working women" in Life Before Man, I knew I had a story.

The structural methods perfected in the 1930s and still widely used to establish basic linguistic elements were not very helpful at the sentence level and up, and so in the 1950s Noam Chomsky introduced the generative grammar approach, beginning with transformational grammar, a model inspired by computer languages. I see traces of Chomsky's notion that complex and potentially infinite language strings are generated by rule-governed transformations of basic forms in Michael Riffaterre's Fictional Truth. His explanation of how the novelistic text creates verisimilitude through the amplification of cultural givens has enlightened my reading habits (although the puzzle of why we accept particular text forms as "realistic" still torments me). Riffaterre demonstrates how narrative realism tends to flaunt rather than mask its fictitious nature--
respond to highly conventionalized signals whose claim to mimetic power is in our cultural agreement that they represent actual human experience. Our responses to expository texts and argumentation are likewise highly conventionalized. Riffaterre's insights on fiction, to what some might consider a frightening extent, hold true for courtroom deliberations, academic lectures, and scientific writing as well.

Roland Barthes's *S/Z* is an exemplary "limit text" in literary criticism. In his hands, the tools of lexicology extend the boundaries of enquiry into the creation of meaning in a realist text. Not only is the text, Balzac's *Sarrasine*, revealed to be signifiying at the limits of realism, but literary criticism and linguistic methods are extended to their boundaries, as well. In *Le plaisir du texte*, Barthes affirms the importance of pleasure in reading as a balance to the unprecedented intensification of theoretical activity in literary studies. He does this by means of a series of "fragments: facettes, touches, bulles, phylactères d'un dessin invisible," a method which to a small extent I employ here, although the conventions of dissertation writing kept me from admitting too much of the kind of free association of images and ideas that often provide me with the most delightful aesthetic epiphanies.

Barthes's extension of the linguistic notion of the unmarked case (*le degré zéro*) to middle-class cultural practices, that is, behavior preceding from the unspoken and
unquestioned belief that particular kinds of realist texts or social behavior are somehow as "natural" and obviously "normal" as a regular verb inflection, charmed me deeply. Barthes also created the readerly-writerly continuum for texts, a concept more easily remembered if his *lisible/scriptible* distinction is translated "able to be read/able to be written." The readerly text has done all the work for the reader, inviting little interpretation, or rewriting, while the semiotically freer writerly text demands active participation by the reader as interpreter, thus writer and rewriter. The most interesting essays about novels, as well as the most interesting novels, are at least a little bit writerly.
CHAPTER II
SILLY STORIES AND TRUE ADVENTURES:
THE FEMALE GOTHIC IN AUSTEN AND ATWOOD

What Ellen Moers first characterized as the "Female Gothic" can be viewed as a literary and psychological expression of a group of outsiders, women, looking into the male world of ownership, management, and professional life. Jane Austen and Margaret Atwood speak from the early and late phases of cultural discussions of women's roles in a world radically altered by technology. Although few would argue that women have "made it," we now live in a postfeminist world, in that many women do own and manage businesses and practice professions once reserved for men. The female gothic sees the male-dominated world in terms of what most women knew best--interiors, both literal and figurative, and themselves as objects of male desire. The curiosity about the world of men that culminated in actual social gains for women is expressed in the female gothic as anxiety about what appears to be a world of predators, full of ugly secrets. Although these fears can easily be ridiculed, they are not so ridiculous. As both Austen and Atwood illustrate, to be a reader/writer in the gothic mode
might be to avoid even sillier and much less useful ways of structuring one's inner life.

The fascinating conventions of gothic fiction play a central role in both Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and Atwood's *Lady Oracle*. Austen's heroine, Catherine Morland, is a reader of gothics; Atwood's Joan Foster/Louisa K. Delacourt writes them (a sign that women have begun to take charge of their psychic landscapes). Both are heroines of the imagination, bravely organizing the humdrum chaos of experience by the tropes of the gothic, both bravely negotiating a rhetorical world that the authors of their texts simultaneously embrace and ridicule. And both are heroines essentially without heroes, because the gothic, as generally read and written by females, is an inward adventure through which the reader/heroine experiences sexuality, aggression, madness, and the quest for self (a woman's place in a man's world) in a sort of dry run for real life. What Austen's heroine would warn us to beware, Atwood's discovers all over again: for a woman negotiating a world owned and managed by men, the greatest danger of all is her own desire to be desired.

**Reading the Female Gothic**

Ellen Moers defines "Female Gothic" as "the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic" (90). Moers continues that it is less simple to say what anyone means by
the term "gothic" except that it has to do with fear. The
gothic does have many readings, within a rather predictable
range, drawing more often on the 19th-century wellspring of
Freud than of Marx, Durkheim, or Saussure. Following a
number of interpreters, to Moers's element of fear I would
add sexuality and, adjusting fear to anxiety, begin with a
concept of the female gothic outlined by Cynthia Griffin
Wolff:

Indeed, the achievement of Radcliffe is quite
remarkable, for she invented a fictional language and a
set of conventions within which "respectable" feminine
sexuality might find expression. Unlike the picaresque
(which has changed even as the social extravagances it
is intended to expose have changed), the Radcliffian
Gothic model has survived virtually intact, attaining
almost the status of cultural myth.⁶ (207)

In her characterization of the "feminine sexuality" of
the gothic, Wolff invokes what came to be called the
"virgin/whore" dichotomy identified by Freud as common to
some degree in all males⁷ and given by later psychologists
a feminine analog: the "devil/priest" syndrome. In the
female gothic, a faceless heroine whom the reader can
identify as herself is pursued by two oddly similar,
although opposed lovers, a good hero and a bad villain. The
reader's anxieties about her own sexuality are projected
onto these two male figures. The experience of the text is
an affirmation of the female sexuality so often denied by
middle-class ideals; in overcoming the obstacles presented by the raging libido of the bad guy, the heroine is able to situate herself in a place of dominion over the disputed territory, her own body/house/castle, and enjoy a safely domesticated sexuality with the hero.

Jean Kennard in *Victims of Convention* attributes the implementation of what she calls the "two-suitor convention" to Jane Austen by way of the novel of sensibility. One suitor embodies the socially desirable traits that the heroine must acquire to mature properly, while the other presents what Judith Wilt, writing on the gothic patterns in Austen, calls "a charming young lover with a hideous moral blemish" (153).

Both Austen and Atwood use the conventions of the gothic in a self-conscious and sophisticated parodic mode. I use "parodic" here in the positive sense which Linda Hutcheon gives it in her discussion of postmodern poetics:

But I want to argue that it is precisely parody--that seemingly introverted formalism--that paradoxically brings about a direct confrontation with the problem of the relation of the aesthetic to a world of significance external to itself, to a discursive world of socially defined meaning systems (past and present) --in other words, to the political and historical. (22)

The gothic is already almost a parody of itself. Like cartoons, gothic texts combine over and over again a small number of highly conventionalized elements of which
their audiences never seem to tire; as in cartoons, the deceptively simple, repetitive forms bring into play a complex network of social and psychological signs that afford essential delights, the pleasure of recognition and the promise of self-invention.

The parodic use of the gothic in *Northanger Abbey* and *Lady Oracle* confronts the gendered social and historical situation of the respective texts. Both irony and parody are sites for testing and creating realities, as well as being the signal of a problematic relationship with a subject matter. Deeper in the female gothic, including and beyond sexual anxiety and desire, are the social changes that allowed a somewhat educated class of women in the 18th and 19th centuries the leisure to read and acquire "accomplishments" such as sketching, needlework, or music while continuing to exclude them from the means and sources to directly acquire wealth, political power, and intellectual status. The female gothic can be read not only as an expression of curiosity about sex, but also curiosity about the other sex, including how they own, manage, and direct what happens in the society at large.

Gothic fiction was immensely popular at the time that Jane Austen was being formed as a reader/writer, in the 1790s and early 1800s and, of course, appeared at least a century before Freud was to create the discourse of the unconscious. Writing on the other side of Freud, Atwood has the full-blown resources of popular Freudianism at her disposal. Indeed, she couldn't avoid them.
While Freud has been faulted for his inability to speak about women in their own right, a lack condensed in the famous *Was will das Weib?*, women had themselves been speaking (in their own write, one might say), and the female gothic is one site of this speaking. The gothic, as practiced by Ann Radcliffe and her followers for two hundred years now, can, like all literature, be read by Freudian analysis as dreamwork, but, as William Patrick Day puts it, "The Gothic is not a crude anticipation of Freudianism, not its unacknowledged father. Rather, the two are cousins, responses to the problems of selfhood and identity, sexuality and pleasure, fear and anxiety as they manifest themselves in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (179).

Hegel has demonstrated the importance of being recognized; at least as important to human consciousness and organization of the self is the pleasure of recognizing one's desires in narrative. The female gothic created psychological access to both kinds of recognition for 18th- and 19th-century readers, and continues to do so for women in the 20th century.¹⁰

The gothic and all its descendants in popular romantic reading for women validate common female emotional experiences. Atwood has Joan Foster, speaking for her Louisa K. Delacourt identity, make this claim:

He wouldn't have been able to understand in the least the desire, the pure quintessential need of my readers
for escape, a thing I myself understood only too well. Life had been hard on them and they had not fought back, they'd collapsed like soufflés in a high wind. Escape wasn't a luxury for them, it was a necessity... The heroines of my books were mere stand-ins: their features were never clearly defined, their faces were putty which each reader could reshape into her own, adding a little beauty. In hundreds of thousands of houses these hidden selves rose at night from the mundane beds of their owners to go forth on adventures so complicated and enticing that they couldn't be confessed to anyone, least of all to their husbands who lay snoring their enchanted snores and dabbling with nothing more recondite than a Playboy Bunny. I knew my readers well... I had the power to turn them from pumpkins to pure gold. War, politics and explorations up the Amazon, those other great escapes, were by and large denied them, and they weren't much interested in hockey or football, games they couldn't play. (Lady Oracle 34-35)

The "he" in this passage is Joan's intellectual leftist-activist husband, Arthur, who does not know about Louisa K. Delacourt: "'You're an intelligent woman,' Arthur would have said. He always said this before an exposition of some failing of mine, but also he really believed it. His exasperation with me was like that of a father with smart kids who got bad report cards" (34). In two pages,
Atwood's heroine moves from shamed agreement with what Arthur and his friends would say, that her gothics "exploit the masses, corrupt by distracting, and perpetuate degrading stereotypes of women as helpless and persecuted" (34) to her own, more comprehensive view of things:

Why refuse them their castles, their persecutors and their princes, and come to think of it, who the hell was Arthur to talk about social relevance? Sometimes his goddamned theories and ideologies made me puke. The truth was that I dealt in hope, I offered a vision of a better world, however preposterous. Was that so terrible? I couldn't see that it was much different from the visions that Arthur and his friends offered, and it was just as realistic. So you're interested in the people, the workers, I would say to him during my solitary midnight justifications. Well, that's what the people and the workers read, the female ones, anyway, when they have time to read at all and they can't face the social realism of True Confessions. They read my books. Figure that out. (35, my emphasis)

The invitation to "Figure that out" is what both Northanger Abbey and Lady Oracle offer the reader: both works, while apparently making fun of the gothic sensibilities of their heroines, show us worlds in which the stories believed by other characters, supposedly solidly anchored in "reality," turn out to be less useful than Mrs. Radcliffe's or Louisa K. Delacourt's. And, as I will argue,
the female gothic provides not merely an escape for women from a dull and frustrating world in which they have little power to fulfill their own desires, but also, and chiefly, a workspace in which to explore anxiety and curiosity about their place in a male-dominated world. This workspace is opened and delineated by Austen's and Atwood's respective explicit incorporation of gothic textuality into their two novels.

Silly Stories

In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen makes a firm effort to keep the "real" (or novelistic) apart from the gothic (or romantic), with the effect something like that of recent movies that use animation with human actors: we can easily tell where the "toon" world ends and reality begins. Or can we? In Atwood's post-Freudian universe, the distinction between the romantic world of the gothic and novelistic "reality" is less clear, partly because the conventions of Freudianism so salient in both the writing and reading of gothic fiction have by now reached a status similar to that of the gothic: they have the broad, inherently humorous, but culturally rich significance of cartoons. Joan Foster's symbol-laden poetry unconsciously accessed as automatic writing and the ghost of her pathologically culpable mother are less supernatural events than familiar Freudian tropes.

Austen's *Northanger Abbey* is a novel structured parodically by the conventions of the gothic. One could
easily draw up a list of what a gothic heroine's life is by
taking down Austen's list of what Catherine Morland's life
isn't, yet she will have an educated, middle-class gothic
adventure. Joseph Wiesenfarth remarks, "In Northanger Abbey
a novel of manners swallows a Gothic romance whole" (6).
Not quite. The undigested bits, the ironic moments when
Austen says, in essence, "This is what an actual gothic
would have done, but look what I am doing instead," point to
the problematics of women's lives in relation to male
dominance. That is, what Austen chooses as the salient
conventions to make fun of are the very points at which the
female gothic can be opened up and taken seriously as a
comment on existing social conditions. Catherine is
presented as an unlikely gothic heroine because her father
"was not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters"
(13); the conventional gothic would be expected to have the
male authority figure trying to prevent the heroine from
experiencing the world as he knows it. As the novel
progresses, Catherine is written as a woman free from the
emotional constraints placed upon other female characters
willing to be defined (mainly by economic necessity) solely
as objects of male desire. Catherine's interest in Henry
Tilney is a literary event; her introduction to gothic
fiction coincides with her introduction to real-life
romance and gives her the means to question the dangers of
it.
Austen's narrator goes on at length about the young Catherine's tomboy behavior, also antithetical to that of the conventional gothic heroine, who is mystified by or suspicious of male behavior rather than at home with it in her own skin:

She was fond of all boys' plays, and greatly preferred cricket not merely to dolls, but to the more heroic enjoyments of infancy, nursing a dormouse, feeding a canary-bird, or watering a rosebush. Indeed she had no taste for a garden . . . She was moreover noisy and wild, hated confinement and cleanliness, and loved nothing so well as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house. (13-14)

It is difficult for the term "victim" to adhere to such an unfeminine character. The narrator shows the early Catherine an unlikely heroine, describing her as having "a thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without colour, dark lank hair, and strong features;--so much for her person--and not less unpropitious for heroism seemed her mind" (13). But by the time puberty is accomplished and Catherine is a candidate for sexual awakening, she is also qualified to have a gothic adventure, less by her having become "quite a good-looking girl" than by her self-imposed discipline: "from fifteen to seventeen she was in training to be a heroine; she read all such works as heroines must read to supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their
eventful lives" (15). Reading, looking for patterns and meaning in daily events and interpreting events in the light of some theoretical construct, will turn out to be Catherine's strong suit, as well as what she has in common with the man of her choice.

Eleanor, sister to the hero, Henry, describes the perfect sister-in-law, a description obviously meant to apply to Catherine, demonstrating once and for all that she is the perfect gothic heroine: "Open, candid, artless, guileless, with affections strong but simple, forming no pretensions, and knowing no disguise" (206). A kind of blank innocence is the sine qua non for the job. As Atwood's Joan Foster says, one of the important pleasures a reader of goths enjoys to this day is that of identifying with a heroine who, for no personal reason, is the object of intense interest and desire. This characteristic expression of a need to be acknowledged and valued by a powerful male figure is consistent with my reading of the gothic as a longing curiosity about the male world and the social powers of its inhabitants and with the more common Freudian interpretations.

Austen's narrator points out that Catherine's mother does not have any "alarming presentiments of evil" or "[c]autions against the violence of such noblemen and baronets as delight in forcing young ladies away to some remote farm-house" (20) as Catherine departs for a stay at Bath with her neighbors, the Allens. For the conventional
gothic heroine, venturing into the world of men is fraught with mysterious, albeit obvious, dangers at the hand of the dominant. In a conventional gothic, an older female figure would, in the absence of a mother (usually dead), reduce the heroine to wretchedness through her "imprudence, vulgarity, or jealousy--whether by intercepting her mail, ruining her character, or turning her out of doors" (20). Because women can be relied upon as often as others of subordinate status to turn on one another in competition for the favors of the powerful, the gothic heroine is a woman without a mentor. She lacks the benefit a young man is likely to have of an older man to initiate him into the power structure. There is a structural failure in women's lives. A woman venturing out on her own to explore the world of men cannot count on any help from other women; if not fellow victims, they are instruments of doom.

One of the most sinister moments in this middle-class drama is when the narrator reveals that Isabella's mother, "Mrs. Thorpe was a widow, and not a very rich one" (34). The gothic potential of this character is parodically arrested and developed by the narrator's assurance that "This brief account of the family is intended to supersede the necessity of a long and minute detail from Mrs. Thorpe herself, of her past adventures and sufferings . . . in which the worthlessness of lords and attorneys might be set forth" (34), "the worthlessness of lords and attorneys" again pointing to anxiety about being caught in the web of a
male-dominated social system that created the ever present concern a woman without a flush husband or indulgent father must have about supporting herself without a man's social resources to draw upon.

In both Austen and Atwood, characters can be identified according to their degree of involvement in the gothic plot embedded in the novels. In *Northanger Abbey*, Henry Tilney is the hero; the villain is split between John Thorpe and General Tilney (splitting and doubling being perfectly normal gothic operations\(^\text{11}\)). Mrs. Allen, the logical female persecutor of the heroine, is immediately dismissed as a vacuous character who "had a most harmless delight in being fine" (20). Isabella Thorpe, a young woman looking to marry Catherine's brother James, is the female heavy, who tries to imprison the heroine in a bad story and marry her, in a cozy reciprocal exchange, to Isabella's idiotically villainous brother John, who is after Catherine's fictitious fortune.

Because Isabella is both inside and out of the embedded gothic, firmly entrenched in the novelistic world of Bath, and balls, and serious fortune hunting\(^\text{12}\) as well as being the gothic dangerous woman, I want to look closely at the function of her dangerous stories. Her ballroom patter is a constant barrage of bad ideas about men and women, and her social style one of constant emotional exacerbation. Although Catherine takes *Mysteries of Udolfo* seriously, she is subject to none of Austen's most biting
irony, while Isabella is so harshly lampooned by the narrator that she could be the victim of a bilious Alexander Pope working in prose. Catherine and Isabella spend the first evening of their acquaintance at Bath circling the Pump-room while Isabella demonstrates that she can "discover a flirtation between any gentleman and lady who only smiled at each other; and point out a quiz through the thickness of a crowd" (33).

Isabella presents herself as an emotional text and tries to instruct Catherine in her role as friend and confidante how to properly "read" her. Her broad hints that she is partial to clergymen are supposed to alert Catherine to Isabella's interest in Catherine's brother James, but "[Catherine] was not experienced enough in the finesse of love, or the duties of friendship, to know when delicate raillery was properly called for, or when a confidence should be forced" (36).

Isabella introduces Catherine, already a reader, to the pleasures of The Mysteries of Udolfo and the world of the female gothic. Although Isabella reads these novels for a few quick frissons because they are all the rage, Catherine is enthralled. She prefers the psychological adventures of the innocent female id as proffered by the gothic to Isabella's worldly dissertations on the fine points of flirtation. She is making a choice between two possible ways to account for the new emotions and desires she is beginning to experience, and the gothic version of the
dangers of life away from home is making sense to her. She senses that there is more to it than just being desirable and, consequently, well married. Her first peek into the world structured by male power indicates that there must be hidden dangers, although Austen's narrator situates the danger other than where Catherine expects to find it.

The most destructive of Isabella's habits is her constant polarizing of gender roles in an ongoing account of the battle of the sexes, an account that always seems to report a victory for herself:

I told Capt. Hunt at one of our assemblies this winter, that if he was to tease me all night, I would not dance with him, unless he would allow Miss Andrews to be as beautiful as an angel. The men think us incapable of real friendship you know, and I am determined to show them the difference (40) . . . I have no notion of treating men with such respect. That is the way to spoil them (43) . . . But you men are all so immoderately lazy . . . You men have such restless curiosity! You speak of the curiosity of women, . . . indeed!--'tis nothing (57) . . . But you men think yourselves of such consequence (90).

The stereotypes of women held by men that Isabella is supposedly throwing back at them all speak of women's socially disadvantaged situations: women competing for limited resources in the form of eligible single males cannot bond in a common pursuit the way men might in their
business and professional lives (we know that Miss Andrews does not look like an angel); women are lazy—they just stay home; women are curious above all, especially about what it would be like not to stay home. Like any common flirt, Isabella teases men about their fancied superiority, knowing that she is flattering their socially sanctioned sense of worth, actually reinforcing the status quo, she hopes to her advantage. In the moments quoted above, one consistently feels the narrator's contempt for the character by virtue of some of Austen's least subtle ironic commentary. The point at which a woman is made stupid or is willing to be made stupid by the fierce competition for male resources is where she has bought into a real-world cultural text that we can easily infer is ridiculous to Austen. Rather than helping her interrogate sexual connections, as the gothic does for Catherine, these really silly stories hide the truth from their silly, but ultimately pathetic, victim.

Isabella reads Mysteries of Udolfo and other romances with Catherine to pass the time, but Catherine's attempts to engage her in a lively discussion somehow always turn to the same silly stories of real-life love and conquest. Isabella's comic villain brother John is also given to making pronouncements on the nature of "You women," as well as on the gothic: "Udolfo! Oh, Lord, not I; I never read novels; I have something else to do" (48). The silliness of the two Thorpes contrasts with the wittier and less
stereotyped perceptions of Henry and Catherine, two unashamed readers of gothic fiction. Henry begins:

"Every body allows that the talent of writing agreeable letters is peculiarly female. Nature may have done something, but I am sure it must be equally assisted by the practice of keeping a journal."

"I have sometimes thought," said Catherine, doubtfully, "whether ladies do write so much better letters than gentlemen! That is--I should not think the superiority was always on our side."

"As far as I have the opportunity of judging, it appears to me that the usual style of letter-writing among women is faultless, except in three particulars."

"A general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar."

"Upon my word! I need not have been afraid of disclaiming the compliment. You do not think too highly of us in that way." (27)

Henry relents:

"I should no more lay it down as a general rule that women write better letters than men, than that they sing better duets, or draw better landscapes. In every power, of which taste is the foundation, excellence is pretty fairly divided between the sexes." (28)

Catherine and Henry are having a real conversation
about a significant subject, something beyond ritual flirtation. Henry is displaying some of the bullying lover-mentor behavior observed by Judith Wilt (147) as common to Austen heroes (Catherine makes the astute observation that "to torment" and "to instruct" might sometimes be synonymous (110)), but has a more reasonable attitude toward women and relationships between men and women than John and Isabella do. It is, of course, their nasty fictions that make them villainous. The literal lies the Thorpes tell are emblematic of the socially disseminated untruths about the "nature" of men and women that they voice with such unexamined fervor.

John Thorpe is a compulsive liar, inventing whatever bad story will most immediately gratify his appetite for the appearance of wealth and status. Austen makes hilarious pre-Freudian use of Freudian symbols in her characterization, Thorpe's constant boast being of the strength and wildness of his horse, which is in fact pretty tame: "[L]ook at his loins; only see how he moves; that horse cannot go less than ten miles an hour: tie his legs and he will get on. What do you think of my gig, Miss Morland? a neat one, is not it? Well hung; town built" (46). While most of Thorpe's lies belong to the merely annoying habits of a "rattle," his gothic potential is realized in the lies he tells to keep Catherine away from Henry and, worse, to set her up to be cruelly used by Henry's father, General Tilney, who is the gullible type
when it comes to tales that might flatter his own status-seeking sensibilities.

The second time that John Thorpe lies to keep Catherine away from the Tilneys (a scene that provides the best of Austenian suspense), the reader is greatly relieved to see her stand up to him, to her own brother James, and to her predatory friend Isabella. The nightmare-like sense of helpless struggle with an evil force so dominant in gothic tales is transmuted by Austen into anxiety over the deceptions being worked around Catherine by John Thorpe. While one feels little concern that Catherine will really find anything gruesome at Northanger Abbey, the machinations of the stupid Thorpe create some real anxiety for the reader longing to see Catherine show some spirit.

Perhaps the silliest stories both John and Isabella believe are the ones they tell themselves of their own magnetism. John's proposal to Catherine is absurd because she has done nothing at all to encourage him. He doesn't know how to read her polite but firm brush-off at their last meeting in Bath. Isabella loses both Catherine's brother, James, and Henry's brother, the rakish Captain Tilney, as well as Catherine's friendship, because she misreads Tilney's attentions. Not only do the Thorpes not know how to appreciate a good novel, they do not know how to read the social narratives in which they are immersed. Henry and Catherine (or Henry/Catherine) triumph in the end because they have learned to read. Truth perceiving and truth
telling are ascribed to the two characters who are sincere fans of the gothic.

While the tone of *Northanger Abbey* is rational and antiromantic, the sympathies of the narrator are clearly with Catherine, who would rather discuss the adventures of gothic heroines than exert the mental and emotional energies her friend Isabella does in turning her life into what we would now handily describe as a "soap opera." As in almost every Austen novel, the heroine appears to "learn her lesson" at the feet/phallus of a reasonable hero, bites the bullet, and lives happily ever after (thus proving comedy to be Ms. Austen's genre).

If, following Kennard's reading, Henry is to be seen as the emblem of Catherine's maturity, the right choice must be on the side of language skills (to the point of pedantry), artistic taste, and, of course, "common sense," all attributes a biographer would certainly ascribe to Jane Austen, but not necessarily to the average male of her day. As a character, Henry is unusually in touch with the nominally feminine interests of novels and clothing:

"Do you understand muslins, sir?"

"Particularly well; I always buy my own cravats, and am allowed to be an excellent judge; and my sister has often entrusted me in the choice of a gown." (28)

The knowledge of muslins Henry reveals to Mrs. Allen seems to be genuine, as is his deep respect for his sister. In a deft metonymic gesture, Austen has Henry comment of
Catherine's gown, "It is very pretty, madam... but I do not think it will wash well; I am afraid it will fray" (28). Henry is voicing the female gothic anxiety—to leave or be forced to leave home and put at large in the world of men is a test that could very well leave a woman washed out, frayed, and tossed aside for a newer style.

I must disagree with Kennard's acerbic summary: "Catherine has finally rejected what John Thorpe stands for and has become Henry... But the reader is not distressed, mainly because it appears to be more interesting to be Henry than to be Catherine" (28). To say that Catherine becomes Henry is to miss the inherent gynocentricity of the female gothic. Catherine has become herself, because as a gothic hero, Henry is a projection of the desires, fears, and curiosity of Catherine and a female reader.

Looking as far as she could see from her own vantage point, Austen has taken a young girl inexperienced in the ways of the world of men and exposed her to the cruelest danger of upper middle-class life: the transformation of all relationships and human potential into a means of commercial exchange and the display of goods. Women were and continue to be particularly vulnerable to these dangers. General Tilney viewed Catherine's nonexistent fortune as a way to increase his already sufficient wealth and John Thorpe hoped to acquire the fortune he lacked through marriage to Catherine.
The gothic happy ending gives a woman a secure place in a male-dominated universe without the nightmare of selling out to the odious lover or losing her bargaining power (literally "cheapening herself") by compromising her virtue. Far ahead of her time, Austen has sensed the psychological dimensions of light reading for women and made the observation in Northanger Abbey that the silly stories available to a young woman starting out in life are often more dangerous and less useful than a good novel. Tales told by greedy or well intentioned relations of the great power of a young woman's erotic charms properly dispensed miss one important point obvious to the serious reader of Udolfo: the world of men is full of ugly secrets and selfish predators and the power a woman has as an object of desire is both illusory and transient.

True Adventures

Living in a late feminist universe, Atwood's heroine does not even pretend to "learn her lesson." The novel concludes with Joan, the earth-goddess, ready to begin her cyclic mating ritual anew. If Northanger Abbey is essentially the story of a young girl's sexual awakening, Lady Oracle is an awakening to the dangers of desire. As Yeats said in his notes to The Wind Among the Reeds (153), "the desire of the woman . . . is for the desire of the man." This is the danger that Joan's gothic character Charlotte finds at the center of the maze:
Redmond was the killer. He was a killer in disguise, he wanted to murder her as he had murdered all his other wives. He wanted to replace her with the other one, the next one, thin and flawless.

The flesh fell away from his face, revealing the skull behind it; he stepped towards her, reaching for her throat. *(Lady Oracle 342-43)*

For the character in the costume gothic Joan is writing, the "next one, thin and flawless" is the spectral incarnation of the deadly desire for a man's desire. But, if we are to believe Joan's narration, in her own life she is the one who goes from one lover to another, leaving a wake of cuckold's in her path. The gothic "secret sins" in Joan's past are her other, fat self of childhood and a second, secret self in Louisa K. Delacourt. She herself creates multiple Joans.

A simple way to make sense of this is to once again invoke the Griffin Wolff hypothesis that the gothic hero/antihero is a projection of the heroine's sexuality or emotional life (the two are not easily separated). While Redmond, the character in the novel within Atwood's novel, goes through a rapid metamorphosis, revealing himself in turn as all the doubled men in Joan's actual life, he is really none of them, and, in a sense, they are not themselves either. Henry in Austen's novel can be seen to realize most fully his gothic potential as a projection of the emotional and intellectual maturity Catherine was
striving for. In *Lady Oracle*, Joan's father (a post-Freudian universe makes homage to the Oedipal obligatory), the daffodil man, Paul, Arthur, and The Royal Porcupine are even more easily transformed into psychological functions for the heroine's personal narrative, her own inner adventure.

The snare for Joan in *Lady Oracle* (which is also a snare for Isabella Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*) is the desire to be desired. This is what keeps Louisa K. Delacourt's reading audience laboring under a hot hair dryer, soaking themselves in bubble bath, enduring painful tweezings and high heels, and, as Austen advises in *Northanger Abbey*, "if she have the misfortune of knowing any thing, should conceal it as well as she can" (111). As in *Northanger Abbey*, however, Joan's abilities as a reader of fiction will put her ahead of the characters who seem to be fixed in "reality."

In *Northanger Abbey*, the bourgeois potential of the old consuming the young, so central to the early gothic, takes the relatively uncomplicated shape of General Tilney, the vain status-seeker. Tilney is pale and pleasant beside the intensely pathological figure of Joan's mother in *Lady Oracle*.

Mrs. Delacourt is herself the victim of stupid real-life stories. Like General Tilney, she is caught up in the illusion of the necessity of building an ever more impressive facade of luxury and social importance (which
illusion, of course, still motivates the American middle class). Joan says their relationship was "professionalized" early (67). The parent-child relationship is for Mrs. Delacourt a project, something like growing a prize gladiolus, but the child is messy, recalcitrant, uncooperative. One of Joan's many unpleasant memories is of being forced to dance the part of a mothball in her first dance recital because of her mother's mortification at the thought of her overweight child on public display in a pink tutu with butterfly wings. Like Austen's Catherine Morland, the young Joan Delacourt is evidently not heroine material, but she wants to fly in her pink tutu anyway.

Joan's mother reads herself as the victim in a grim antiromance. She did not marry her hero. She married someone else because she was pregnant. She did not live happily ever after. The illusion of the supernatural in Radcliffe becomes the absence of the supernatural in Austen (it can't happen in "the midland counties of England"); in *Lady Oracle*, the supernatural is perhaps, and quite matter-of-factly, there, the locus of mother-daughter pathology. The recurring specter of Joan's mother both before and after her death in her white gloves and navy-blue suit is explained by Joan herself:

She'd never really let me go because I had never really let her go. It had been she standing behind me in the mirror, she was the one who was waiting around each turn, her voice whispered the words. She had been the
lady in the boat, the death barge, the tragic lady with flowing hair and stricken eyes, the lady in the tower. She couldn't stand the view from the window, life was her curse. How could I renounce her? She needed her freedom also; she had been my reflection too long. What was the charm, what would set her free? . . . My mother was a vortex, a dark vacuum, I would never be able to make her happy. Or anyone else. Maybe it was time for me to stop trying. (330)

For Atwood's character, desirability is encoded as the ability to make a man happy, a job that requires besides feminine beauty a dogged Oedipal nurturing in a relationship entirely unlike the companionship of spiritual and intellectual equals that was Austen's ideal.

Joan's book of poetry that has made her a "culture heroine," written by staring at the reflections of a candle in a three-sided mirror, is attributed to her mother's ghost, who might well be expected to live there. One of Joan's clearest memories of her childhood is of watching her mother labor before a three-sided vanity mirror; as a child she dreamed that "instead of three reflections [her mother] had three actual heads, which rose from her toweled shoulders on three separate necks" (66-67). Later, Joan sees herself as "a duplicitous monster" (95) for hiding her anger and jealousy from high school friends.

Corresponding to her mother's monstrous three heads, Joan has three distinct identities. Joan Delacourt is the
fat, rebellious daughter who is at war with her compulsive mother. The "disputed territory" is Joan's body, a common site of conflict in the gothic, sublimated to landscape in Austen, and made Oedipal, a site of the struggle between generations in Atwood. The death of the woman from whom Joan most consciously took her identity, Aunt Lou, allows Joan literally to assume a second identity. Complying with the terms of Aunt Lou's will, she loses 100 pounds, and at nineteen, learns what it is to be an object of desire. When the $2000 inheritance, her reward, runs low in England, Joan takes Aunt Lou's full name, Louisa K. Delacourt, as a pseudonym to write "Costume Gothics."

Joan's third identity, Joan Foster, is bifurcated: she is the wife of Arthur Foster, and later a legitimate poet/celebrity as author of Lady Oracle. The pathology thickens. While parental influence in Northanger Abbey takes the form of overt guidance and example, which may or may not be taken seriously by the child, Atwood's characters in Lady Oracle are part of a network of unconscious motivations deriving from parent-child relationships. It is a popular commonplace today that a woman looks for a man like her father, but it is probably just as likely for a woman to seek the emotional counterpart of her mother, perhaps more so when the mother has been particularly oppressive. What more fitting punishment for a daughter guilty of hating her mother? In the manic-depressive Arthur Joan finds the same aloof yet demanding, impossible-to-please kind of
personality. He complains of her lack of intellectual discipline, but one suspects he does not want to see her acquire much. To do so would destroy the equilibrium of their relationship. Just as her terrible cooking seems to comfort him, so do her other faults.

Arthur's reaction to Joan's public success as a writer parallels her mother's response to her successful dieting:
While I grew thinner, she herself grew distraught and uncertain . . .

About the only explanation I could think of for this behavior of hers was that making me thin was her last available project . . . I should have been delighted by her distress, but instead I was confused. I'd really believed that if I became thinner she would be pleased; a smug, masterful pleasure, but pleasure nonetheless: her will being done. Instead she was frantic. (123)

And when Joan's poetry is acclaimed:
I gave Arthur a copy of Lady Oracle, inscribed in the front, For Arthur, With All My Love, XXXX, Joan. But he didn't say one word about it, and I was afraid to ask him what he thought. His manner became distant . . . I would catch him giving me hurt looks . . . he acted as if I'd committed some unpardonable but unmentionable sin. (235)

Joan discovers that Arthur thinks that the book is about their marriage, not a flattering surmise. Like her mother, he sees Joan as an extension of himself. There is
some beautifully convoluted logic in the thought of Joan Foster's poetry being "really" the voice of her mother and Arthur's thinking that it is "really" about him. It seems appropriate to join the two vortices of emotional misery in one mysterious whirlpool.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff makes the important observation that heroines in the 20th-century female gothic, from about the time between the two world wars on, have been marrying the "demon-lover," rather than the more domesticated hero (214). Jean Kennard explains that in the modern adaptation of the two suitors convention "[t]he husband now plays the role of the wrong suitor who represents the stifling world of bourgeois values: the lover is the right suitor who represents freedom and the chance for a richer life" (19).

As the world of men became more stifling for men and more accessible to women, the men who toiled in the confines of the male hierarchies became less appealing to women. As Joan Foster says of her father after the one time she visits him at his job at the hospital, "He was a man in a cage, like most men" (138). This, even though "he looked much more impressive than he ever had at home. He looked like someone with power" (137). Outside the hospital, Joan's father, a successful doctor, is "a man who wears maroon leather slippers and fiddles with houseplants on weekends, and for this reason is thought of as an inconsequential fool by his wife" (138).
One respect in which the world of men has become less dangerous for women between the two wars is that one act of sexual misconduct is no longer sufficient to ruin her chances of respectability, although the social sanctions were still severe for unwed mothers at the time Joan's parents marry, during World War II. Joan's first lover, Paul, a displaced Polish aristocrat she meets in London, remembers a world unfamiliar to her:

For instance, he viewed the loss of my virginity as both totally his fault—thus making him responsible for me—and a fall from grace which disqualified me from ever being a wife, or his wife at any rate. He thought my lack of guilt was a sign of barbarism. (158)

Joan is curious about Paul's life, but not from the perspective of someone who depends upon him for both support and identity. Paul is forced to supplement his salary from a British bank by writing "trashy novels" under the pen name Mavis Quilp. Inspired by this discovery, Joan takes up writing costume gothics:

I didn't like the thought of getting a job. Nobody likes that thought, really, they only do it because they have to. I could touch-type, but it seemed to me I could make money faster by typing something of my own, and other people's business letters are very boring. (155)

In a world where women are able to make their own way, what men do all day becomes less mysterious. Atwood's main
characters tend to have a self-assured smugness about their understanding of the world because they avoid both the very rich and the very poor. While Catherine Morland is disappointed in the quality of evil she encounters—General Tilney has apparently not murdered his wife and is guilty only of predictable middle-class pride and greed—Joan Foster is continually disappointed in the quality of her "demon lovers." The exotic Paul is threatened by her success as a writer in his genre and disguises, probably even to himself, his jealousy over her professional success as sexual jealousy. The politically radical Arthur is sexually inexperienced and emotionally repressed, always slumping under the baggage of his upper middle-class origins. Even Chuck Brewer, the outrageous Royal Porcupine, just wants to get married and settle down.

The greatest danger for Joan in the world of men is her own success. Unable to reconcile the conflict between her emergence as a celebrity and her understood function as a woman to "make other people happy," she is finally driven to stage her own death by the mean-spirited harassment brought on by her free-spirited activities.

While Mrs. Delacourt is the ghost, the unpleasant and lingering victim of old secrets, Arthur and his nationalist, leftist, activist friends would seem to be further from the gothic center, created from the novelistic text of ordinary reality. Like the Thorpes in *Northanger Abbey*, Arthur, Sam, Don, and Marlene seem to be involved in a much sillier plot
than any of Joan's, which at least makes good reading. The
story of the staff of the leftist Resurgence magazine is so
tawdry that even Joan, who supposedly trades in ridiculous
emotional lives, cannot bear to be around it. When it is
revealed that Marlene, the managing editor, who is married
and has two children by Don, the editor, is having an affair
with Sam, the assistant editor, it all ends up in Joan's
apartment: "My home was a campground littered with other
people's garbage, physical, emotional" (251).

While Joan's imaginary peace offering to Arthur for
having an affair with the Royal Porcupine is laughable, it
has a ring of truth:

Perhaps I could write a Costume Gothic, just for him,
putting his message into a form that the people could
understand. Nobody, I knew, read Resurgence except the
editors, some university professors, and all the rival
radical groups who edited magazines of their own and
spent at least a third of each issue attacking each
other. But at least a hundred thousand people read my
books, and among them were the mothers of the nation.
... But it would never work. In order for Arthur to
appreciate me I'd have to reveal the identity of Louisa
K., and I knew I couldn't do that. No matter what I
did Arthur was bound to despise me. I could never be
what he wanted. I could never be Marlene. (247)

Marlene is the grown-up form taken by the superbrownie from
Joan's childhood, someone her mother had wanted her to be.
The uproar caused by Marlene and Sam's affair, reported by the narrator in the simplest novelistic fashion, is a hilarious satire on what came to be known as "political correctness": "Those in favor [of Don's hitting Marlene] said the workers often hit their wives in the eye, it was an open and direct method of expressing your feelings. Those against it said it was degrading to women" (247).

In Northanger Abbey, the gothic plot of Mrs. Radcliffe turns out to require only slight adjustment to fit "middle England" at the turn of the 18th century. General Tilney turns Catherine out of the Abbey in broad daylight, she has an uneventful trip home, and with little more tribulation is happily reunited with Henry. In Lady Oracle the other characters become involved in a gothic plot that has become Joan's reality. Sam and Marlene seem more than eager to take part in an adventure and are easy game for someone with a busy imagination, a faculty they seem to be lacking. Just as Catherine's identity as a reader empowered her in the world of Northanger Abbey, Joan's writerly skills give her mastery over the plot of her "real" life. Arthur's friends take her suggestion to dynamite the Peace Bridge seriously, and the dynamite becomes the focus of Joan's elaborate death hoax, Sam and Marlene her accomplices.

Joan's ability to write gothics is the obverse of her ability to read the lives of those around her. There is a bitter irony in her saying that she had "always found other people's versions of reality very influential" (160) when
her first lover Paul becomes suspicious and possessive. For her, writing gothic tales seems to provide the kind of relief from "other people's versions of reality" that reading them provides for her audience. After her marriage, she begins to value the extra identity she has as a writer, to need it: "As long as I could spend a certain amount of time each week as Louisa, I was all right . . . But if I was cut off, if I couldn't work on my current Costume Gothic, I would become mean and irritable, drink too much and start to cry" (213).

Rather than finding ultimate pleasure or freedom in any of her romantic involvements, which are essentially workspaces for her three-part identity, Joan finds what she needs in writing. That her writing extends far beyond the text of her commercial goths becomes clear as the crisis in her own life begins to record itself in the pages of her novel, interfering with the usual flow of highly conventional plots and characters. The writing starts to fill up with images and anxieties foreign to her genre. Her realization that "Redmond is the killer" makes her smash a wine-bottle over the head of the reporter who has found her in her hiding place. Like a character in one of her romances, Joan has made physical collision her way of coming to the attention of past suitors, but the elevated violence of this encounter arouses her compassion and apparently her desire. The last chapter of Lady Oracle gives the distinct impression that it is probably the first
chapter of Joan's next true life adventure, whatever her increased level of awareness. Conventional wisdom might have it that the lesson Joan ought to learn is that she should stop trying to make other people (men) happy, but the charm of the novel's end lies in the probability that she won't change her ways. She will continue to make her own path in a world in many ways more complicated and full of danger than that of an Austen heroine. From Austen to Atwood, life has come to offer more possibilities for women, but the dangerous predators and ugly secrets are only beginning to be unveiled. The world of men is not much better for most men than it is for a woman; women's entry into this world as coworkers must also define them as competitors. Catherine Morland in Northanger Abbey will assimilate Henry and take her place as a competent household manager and force for order and reason in her little community. In Lady Oracle, Joan Foster's mother represents the last generation of middle-class women to believe that their interior decorating and dinner parties made a real contribution to the success of a man out there grappling with the vagaries of professional life. Whatever monstrous secrets men once kept from the little woman are now shared delights and burdens. Men, however, are not generally grateful or relieved. As Joan sadly observes:

You could dance, or you could have the love of a good man. But you were afraid to dance, because you had the unnatural fear that if you danced they'd cut your feet
off so that you wouldn't be able to dance. Finally you overcame your fear and danced, and they cut your feet off. The good man went away because you wanted to dance. (335)

Fifteen years after the appearance of Atwood's novel, women today still struggle to engage men in their share of the responsibilities of parenting and household management while, driven by necessity as much as ambition, women strive to take their place in the world of men. Perhaps finding women's culture as full of gothic potential as women have found men's, men resist. Silly stories about femininity and a woman's place and equally silly stories of superwomen still compete with true life adventures of women's professional, family, and creative successes. Perhaps the greatest challenge facing women now is to consider whether and how the world of men can be transformed for the better now that the castle has been stormed and the crypt opened for business.
CHAPTER III
THE OEDIPAL WOMAN (FANNY'S PRICE)

To resist the temptation to reread Atwood's title would be to miss the most succinct statement of the content of this chapter: both Fanny Price in Mansfield Park and Marian MacAlpin in The Edible Woman are not only Woman commodified, but Woman as Mommy, the first and best object of heterosexual male love, whose unquestioned duty is to be always consumed and never exhausted. We will see what else can be read through and around the obvious difference between the two heroines: while Fanny must want above all to be consumed, Marian is able to reject consumption, or at least offer an unacceptable substitute for herself.

Fanny's Price

Both texts establish a context of materialism and consumption beyond the base of middle-class concerns with income and comfort so typical of Austen and Atwood. In Mansfield Park, Sir Thomas's trip to the West Indies not only gives a reason for his absence and uncertain return, but pulls aside the curtain of genteel homes and habits, admitting the commercial infrastructure that finances it all. The recurring language of commerce provides a trace, a
motif, that creates the distinct impression of marriage as a (risky) business venture. Both men and women are assigned value as consumer items, but it is the increasing value of Fanny Price, rising in inverse proportion to the declining value of the Bertram sisters, that makes the plot of Mansfield Park.

The opening sentence of Austen's novel establishes a particularly commercial view of male-female relations:

About thirty years ago, Miss Maria Ward of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet's lady, with all the comforts and consequences of a handsome house and large income. (3)

Although Miss Ward was "at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to it," she got a good deal for her money.

The fragment "Sir Thomas had interest, which from principle" (3-4, my emphasis), although referring to his desire to help Lady Bertram's sister improve the bad lot she had made for herself in marrying Lt. Price, juxtaposes two senses which together, through the homophony of "principle" and "principal," seem plucked from the context of money lending.

Mrs. Norris, Lady Bertram's widowed sister and Fanny's aunt, who lives on the Bertram estate, might seem to lack proper motivation in her desire to bring Fanny to Mansfield,
but the terms in which she discusses the deal with Sir Thomas give plausibility to the action, presenting her as someone who wants to impress her benefactor by investing his money appropriately—"it was impossible for her to aim at more than the credit of projecting and arranging so expensive a charity" (8). Sir Thomas is clearly on the same wavelength as Mrs. Norris:

I only meant to observe, that it ought not to be lightly engaged in, and that to make it really serviceable to Mrs. Price and creditable to ourselves, we must secure the child, or consider ourselves engaged to secure to her hereafter, as circumstances may arise, the provision of a gentlewoman, if no such establishment should offer as you are so sanguine in expecting. (7, my emphasis)

Mrs. Norris has already anticipated a rise in Fanny's value by her association with Sir Thomas, but he is the cautious businessman, preparing for all eventualities. He shares with Mrs. Norris the concern that the relative values of Fanny and his own daughters not be confused:

There will be some difficulty in our way, Mrs. Norris, . . . as to the distinction proper to be made between the girls as they grow up; how to preserve in the minds of my daughters the consciousness of what they are, without making them think too lowly of their cousin; and how, without depressing her spirits too far, to make her remember that she is not a Miss Bertram . . .
Their rank, fortune, expectations, will always be different. (10-11)

Later, when the valuations begin to be reversed, Sir Thomas is apologetic:

The principle was good in itself, but it may have been, and I believe has been carried too far in your case.--I am aware that there has been sometimes, in some points, a misplaced distinction; but . . . you will feel that they were not the least your friends who were preparing you for that mediocrity of condition which seemed to be your lot.--Though their caution may prove eventually unnecessary, it was kindly meant; and of this you may be assured, that every advantage of affluence will be doubled by the little privations and restrictions that may have been imposed. (313)

Sir Thomas is careful to assure Fanny that her sufferings, meager as they were, have been a worthwhile investment, in fact giving a hundred percent return. In the end, "Sick of ambitious and mercenary connections" and "anxious to bind by the strongest securities all that remained to him of domestic felicity" (471), Sir Thomas cannot help feeling that he has "realised a great acquisition in the promise of Fanny for a daughter . . . His liberality had a rich repayment" (472). No small element in the happy resolution of the novel is Sir Thomas's getting a good return on his investment in Fanny.
Although the commercial and ideological aspects of the struggle for middle-class ascendancy have been common constituents of the English novel from its origins, Richardson's *Pamela* being the prototype of female virtue commodified, Fanny Price is the most strikingly commodified of Austen's heroines. From the start to the finish of *Mansfield Park*, the reader is subtly made conscious of the business-like quality of even the ideal match of reason and passion. To a 20th-century reader, Mary Crawford's demands to know whether or not Fanny is "out" sounds a lot like a query about a new product. When Mr. Norris dies, it is time for Mrs. Norris "to claim her share in their niece" (24), but it is her "love of money" that prevents it.

Mrs. Norris is the locus of anxiety about money that is present in spite of the general opinion that Sir Thomas is rich. He has to leave home for more than a year to take care of his financial affairs in Antigua. He takes his son Tom along to get him away from the London friends who have helped him squander a good portion of his younger brother's future income. Although Mrs. Norris is always very tight with her own pursestrings, and makes a show of economy on behalf of Sir Thomas, she is fond of spending other people's money for them. "If I were you, I should not think of the expense" (53), she counsels Mr. Rushworth on home improvement spending.

The play to be given by the young people ought to be as objectionable to Mrs. Norris on moral grounds as it would
have been to Sir Thomas in whose stead she flatters herself to be acting, but rather she likes the opportunity to be busy and "of some use in preventing waste and making the most of things" (141), that is, spending Sir Thomas's money on a project he would never endorse himself.

The most egregious of Mrs. Norris's imprudent interventions in the Bertram affairs is her unfortunately successful endeavor to marry her favorite niece, Maria, to the idiotic Mr. Rushworth. Just as she has mismanaged other matters for Sir Thomas, she has spoiled his daughter with flattery and been instrumental in Maria's wasting her life, all in the name of gratitude and economy. While Sir Thomas agrees in principle that one should not marry against one's inclinations, he finds the attraction of the Rushworth fortune too strong to resist and gives up Maria with no more than a perfunctory examination of her feelings. Mr. Rushworth is the commodity, the Bertrams the greedy shoppers who will regret their purchase.

The misfortune of those who marry for market value only is described in Mary Crawford's sad tales of her friends Mrs. Fraser and Lady Stornaway. Mary's own views of marriage are consistent with an equally sad prognosis:

[T]here is not one in a hundred of either sex, who is not taken in when they marry. Look where I will, I see that it is so; and I feel that it must be so, when I consider that it is, of all transactions, the one in which people expect the most from others, and are least honest themselves. (46)
Fanny's refusal to marry Henry Crawford, a decidedly profitable transaction, is, however, not vindicated by her certain knowledge that she could not love him, but by his running off with Maria Rushworth, an act that causes both Henry and Maria to plunge in value in Sir Thomas's moral economy. What finally makes it possible for Fanny to marry Edmund, the one she loves, is a combination of character and circumstance that raises her value.

Like Richardson's Pamela before her, Fanny triumphs by the dogged practice of virtues publicly approved but often privately ignored. In a maneuver typical of the powerless wanting to acquire if not power of her own, at least the approval of the powerful, Fanny becomes a devoted acolyte to Sir Thomas, priest of rectitude and restraint, oppressor of his own fun-loving daughters, who, feeling no need to improve their position, think only of evading restrictions. It is in becoming valuable to Sir Thomas that Fanny succeeds in becoming the hot commodity she must be in order to escape the mediocre future foreseen for her by her benefactors. By containing and dispensing Sir Thomas's values, Fanny not only increases her own worth, but finally surpasses the value of the natural daughters who destroy their worth by indulging in public indiscretions.

Fanny not only upholds Sir Thomas's opinions about the play to be held in his absence, she also sustains Edmund when his normally upright judgment is obscured by hormonal influences which might lead him "in a line of admiration for
Miss Crawford . . . where Fanny could not follow" (64). Not until the final moral catastrophes have occurred can Edmund say, "How I have been deceived: Equally in brother and sister deceived! I thank you for your patience, Fanny" (459).

Fanny begins by echoing Sir Thomas's moral concerns, but she surpasses him by her superior judgement. While Edmund, who would normally uphold Sir Thomas's standards, is blinded by desire, Sir Thomas himself is handicapped by his long absence. Only Fanny has seen clearly the danger of the Crawfords' weaknesses. Her low relative value in the Bertram hierarchy makes it impossible for her to communicate her misgivings to Sir Thomas. This involuntary silence finally gives way to her position as broker of accurate moral evaluations, making her at last powerful.

Character is important to the narrator of *Mansfield Park*, but desire is the necessary catalyst. On the marriage market, erotic worth can go a long way to compensate for a poor dowry. While Fanny's moral worth is the explicit index of her eligibility, her increasing erotic value is always implied. When Sir Thomas returns and notices how attractive Fanny has become, Edmund admonishes her: "You must really begin to harden yourself to the idea of being worth looking at.--You must try not to mind growing up into a pretty woman" (198). Henry Crawford notices that "Her affections were evidently strong. To see her with her brother! What could more delightfully prove that the warmth of her heart was equal to its gentleness?" (294).
In the dynamics of Mansfield Park, Fanny's dilemma is that she must acquire power without ever seeming to want it; indeed, it must never become evident that she is able to do so. She chooses not to trade openly on her value as an erotic object, but is all the while unconsciously consolidating her value as the perfect erotic object, Mommy. Just as she increases in value by containing and dispensing the virtue that Julia and Maria are unable to dispense, in her passively aggressive fashion Fanny is able to take over the maternal functions so imperfectly performed by other characters.

The silly doubles, Fanny's mother Mrs. Price and her sister Lady Bertram, are two not-good-enough mothers, while the third sister, Mrs. Norris, might be called an antimother. In the progress of the narrative, Fanny increasingly becomes the locus of maternal activity as the value of her character is acknowledged. The joyful union with Edmund is a consummation of her markedly incestuous inclinations. Fanny's taking up of the tasks of mothering gives her both moral power and erotic value.

Sir Thomas leaves for Antigua just as his two daughters reach the age of marriageability: "He could not think Lady Bertram quite equal to supply his place with them, or rather to perform what should have been her own" (32). He leaves believing that "Mrs. Norris's watchful attention" and "Edmund's judgement" would suffice to keep them from folly. Of course he is mistaken. Both Edmund and Mrs. Norris are
in their own ways seduced by the worldly Crawfords, as are
the two Bertram sisters, left by the neglect of their mother
and the flattery of Mrs. Norris "entirely deficient in the
less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity, and
humility. In everything but disposition they were admirably
taught" (19).

The Mommy function left open by Lady Bertram and
subverted by Mrs. Norris will be filled by Fanny, who like a
mother, "regarded [Edmund] as an example of everything good
and great, as possessing worth, which no one but herself
could ever appreciate" (37). While testosterone fogs
Edmund's judgement, Fanny is there for him and, increasingly
during the patriarch's absence, for the others.

After her first encounter with the Crawfords, Fanny
expresses the parental generation's disapproval of the
flippant way in which Mary spoke of her uncle. While this
evaluation is, not surprisingly, shared by Edmund, who had
"formed [Fanny's] mind and gained her affections" (64), he
will soon begin to stray from the very principles that had
formed a moral circuit from Sir Thomas through Edmund to
Fanny.

Fanny's first maternal act is to perceive and prevent,
as far as her low status would allow, the flirtation between
Maria Bertram, now engaged to Rushworth, and Henry Crawford.
She does this in her usual passive-aggressive fashion,
quietly disapproving of Henry, who has no idea why she
seems determined not to like him. Demonstrating an acute
sensitivity to literary symbols, Fanny objects to Maria's jumping the hedge with Henry at Sotherton before Mr. Rushworth can bring the key:

Fanny, feeling all this to be wrong, could not help making an effort to prevent it. "You will certainly hurt yourself against those spikes--you will tear your gown--you will be in danger of slipping into the ha-ha. You had better not go." (99-100)

Too delicate to come close to her real objections, those a good parent would be expected to feel, Fanny sounds like a nanny fussing over an errant child.

In the same scene, her attitude towards Julia Bertram is similarly parental when Julia accuses her of avoiding boring encounters with the Rushworth family:

This was a most unjust reflection, but Fanny could allow for it, and let it pass; Julia was vexed, and her temper was hasty, but she felt that it would not last, and therefore taking no notice, only asked her if she had not seen Mr. Rushworth. (101)

In this visit to Sotherton, a pattern is first established of Fanny as the stable center of action, remaining in one location while the others come and go from her, allowing her to scrutinize their actions as they appear before her alone or in pairs. She seems to be the only one free of an infantile egocentrism that prevents even Edmund from forming a clear idea of the Crawfords' potential to disturb the peace of Mansfield.
Fanny's acquisition of maternal authority cannot be ascribed to conscious design—she would immediately lose all appeal as a young woman. Her conscious desires are like those of the other young persons, but her capacity to act directly is limited by her inferior status in the household. At one point the narrator shows Fanny at her first ball, "sitting, most unwillingly, among the chaperons at the fire... While waiting and wishing... dialogue between [Mrs. Norris and Mrs. Rushworth] was forced on her" (116-117). Fanny is presented as unwilling to be identified with the parental generation and privy to their perceptions, yet the good character she has been assigned demands it.

When she is again sought out, it is once more as a locus of stability and good judgment. Fanny cannot be induced to take a part in the salacious play, Lovers' Vows, but, feeling left out as she had at the ball, she soon begins to help the others. A particularly poignant (or ridiculous) example:

Fanny in her pity and kind-heartedness... [was] at great pains to teach [Mr. Rushworth] how to learn, giving him all the helps and directions in her power, trying to make an artificial memory for him, and learning every word of his part herself, without his being much the forwarder. (166)

One of the most painful episodes in Mansfield Park happens when Fanny must endure being solicited by both Edmund and Mary Crawford to help them rehearse their love scene, only
to have each delighted to find that the other has had the same impulse.

Fanny seems to have no choice but to make herself valuable by exploiting the empty moral and maternal spaces left by Lady Bertram and her children. As usual for Austen, her final triumph is expedited by the moral running aground of other characters, but she is positioned to profit from their losses by the practice of maternal virtue. Her marriage to her cousin/surrogate brother-father, Edmund, makes her a prototypical Oedipal Woman. Her final triumph as a commodity is to be consumed, a triumph that presupposes that she will always be available for further consumption.

A Note

As a footnote to this discussion of Fanny Price as commodity, I want to consider *Mansfield Park* as evidence of Jane Austen as literary consumer item. An interesting feature of critical writings on this novel is that so many respond with intensely personal dislike for Fanny and Edmund as characters, or indeed, as actual people. While I can see no validity in claims that the structure of the novel is faulty because the heroine is a prude, I do think that there is a contradiction within the text that might account for some of the critics' discomfort with the novel and their willingness to blame it on the pious Fanny and Edmund.
It can be argued that Austen wrote this novel hoping to improve her bad luck with revenues and publishers. Evangelical novels were hot items in the literary marketplace at the time she submitted *Mansfield Park* for publication. As the main characters who carry the evangelical element of the novel, Edmund and Fanny are also the site of a certain theological confusion. The gospel of Evangelical Christianity is overshadowed by the gospel of Jane Austen. "Suffer, repent, have faith" is whispered; the loud message is "be rational, know yourself, then marry according to both reason and passion," a message clear in all of Austen's work. Mary Crawford is doomed in the Austen microcosm when at Sotherton she teases Edmund about the distance they had walked: "She would not calculate, she would not compare. She would only smile and assert. The greatest degree of rational consistency could not have been more engaging" (96). The saddest part of Henry's running off with Maria Rushworth is not her exile with Mrs. Norris, which the narrator seems to find satisfactory, but Henry's loss of Fanny, "the woman whom he had rationally, as well as passionately loved" (469).

Austen's attempt at self-commodification was, by some lights, only partially successful as a literary work. Personally, I think that Fanny exemplifies the Austen gospel as well as any of her heroines, and those who have been bothered by the quasi-Evangelical postures of the main characters needn't have been. The narrator approves of
Fanny's unflinching adherence to Jane's tenets of righteousness—she excels in self-knowledge without emotional excess, condemning all ill-fated matches—and the narrator does not revere Edmund the clergymen beyond what he deserves: "Even in the midst of his late infatuation, he had acknowledged Fanny's mental superiority... She was of course only too good for him; but... nobody minds having what is too good for them" (471).

The Edible, Oedipal Woman

In Mansfield Park the question is raised, as it was in Pamela, What makes a woman valuable? If it is, as these novels seem to say, intelligence and strength of character, one must then ask, What makes a man valuable? The answer in both cases seems to be the ability to appreciate a valuable woman. Somewhere between Jane Austen and Margaret Atwood, things have changed. Consumerism, psychoanalysis, and feminism have emerged as full-blown elements in the cultural conversation, and, while the Atwood heroine still embodies those old-fashioned middle-class virtues of good sense and self-knowledge, the hero is no longer rewarded by being made proprietor of the wonderful woman. He is one of a number of forces impinging upon the heroine in her quest for not only self-knowledge, but also autonomy.

Freud, as the popular granddad of modern psychology, is always spectrally there. In Austen, the literary images which were to become the stuff of Freudian dream analysis--
horses, keys, houses--are not fully realized as signs of the yet-to-be-discovered unconscious. In Atwood, the narrator/heroine's BA is a license for the general practice of Social Science. In The Edible Woman, Ainsley, the psychology major, and the trio of English graduate students constantly remind us that we are no longer innocent of the functions of the unconscious. Ainsley must find a "father image" for her unborn son (21); Fischer assures Marian that Alice in Wonderland is really about a girl "trying to find her role...as a Woman" (199).

The most general point of comparison between Mansfield Park and The Edible Woman is the commodification of a heroine whose erotic power is situated in the practice of motherly virtue. But the buds of consumerism and feminism just visible in Austen have grown into a jungle setting for this Atwood novel. Biological motherhood is problematic. Choosing a mate has become, like the choice between two brands of tomato juice, not a rational one.

Julia Kristeva, in "Women's Time," addresses the danger of motherhood as social signifier, the impossible conflation of erotic and maternal functions:

[H]er debt to the woman-mother--make a woman more vulnerable within the symbolic order, more fragile when she suffers within it, more virulent when she protects herself from it. If the archetype of the belief in the omnipotence of an archaic, full, total englobing mother with no frustration, no separation,
with no break-producing symbolism (with no castration, in other words), then it becomes evident that we will never be able to defuse the violences mobilized through the counter-investment necessary in carrying out this phantasm, unless one challenges precisely this myth of the archaic mother. (205)

As this passage demonstrates, psychoanalysis gave us the language to create the "archaic mother," the Oedipal Woman, and, by articulating this middle-class nightmare, made it possible for real women to demand a rethinking of motherhood. Marian, Ainsley, and Clara in *The Edible Woman* represent three possible positions vis-à-vis biological motherhood: a modern (in the literary sense) aversion, a neoromantic idealization, and victimhood predicated upon true love.²²

Marian's distaste for biological motherhood does not prevent her from being Mommy to the grownup boys in her life, but Mommy disguised as Nurse—sensible, organized, compassionate, efficient, and dependable: "stout shoes and starched cuffs and a leather bag full of hypodermic needles" (195). Her relationship with her fiancé Peter comprises acts of interpretation, humoring, entertaining, anticipating, and, to her deep inner dismay, remaining silent while he gets to live for both of them. Silence is a relief and a duty to Fanny Price, who, by some amazing timing, is able nevertheless to demonstrate her superior intelligence. For Marian, a character begun in the early
1960s and taking her final form in 1965, silence is a problem, an issue, a locus of (feminist) agony.

Peter is as rational a choice as any for Marian's husband. Good-looking, well-dressed, successful, he shares Marian's respect for good sense and order. While Austen might not have liked him well enough to reward him with marriage to her heroine, he would, like Henry Crawford, get points for recognizing a valuable woman. Peter's rival, Duncan, is a farcical twist on the two-suitor convention. He offers a completely unreasonable and equally egocentric alternative to the egocentric Peter. If Marian is to learn anything from this suitor, whose position is still tenuous by the novel's end, it is a preference for menace demystified. While Peter is a glossy consumer product who never interrogates the source of his ideals of happy bachelorhood succeeded by nuclear family bliss, Duncan does nothing but proclaim his selfishness and habits of deception, admitting freely that to him Marian is "just another substitute for the laundromat" (149).

Duncan amplifies the Nurse-Mommy function that Marian already practices with Peter, but makes no demand on her future or her past. Although Duncan is exactly the same age as Peter, 26, he looks "about fifteen" (48) and even "a ten-year-old" (50). He behaves self-consciously as a deranged child, taking Marian on a sort of Wonderland tour, an escape for both of them from the adult reality that is becoming curioser and curioser.
Duncan gives voice to anxieties about life as a consumer adventure, a theme that blasts as loudly from this text as it mutters sedately from the pages of Mansfield Park:

Production-consumption. You begin to wonder whether it isn't just a question of making one kind of garbage into another kind. The human mind was the last thing to be commercialized but they've done a good job of it now; what is the difference between the library stacks and one of those used-car graveyards? (147)

At the end, when he and Marian make a brief attempt to sort out who was destroying whom, Duncan concludes, "What does it matter, you're back to so-called reality, you're a consumer" (287), referring to Marian's dramatic recovery from what we now identify as anorexia.

Although the eating disorder was brought on by the fear that Peter was going to consume her and immediately relieved when Peter refused both the cake surrogate and Marian herself, Duncan's words might refer to himself as well, as her next romantic interest. While it seems too difficult for most young women to remove themselves altogether from the love market, Atwood's gospel promotes avoiding destructive relationships while asserting that Austen's rational choice is probably not possible. We are carried along by the currents of our unconscious and, in retrospect, would probably agree that Fanny Price rejected Henry less on the basis of her reasonable moral evaluation of him than
because of her deep, ultimately irrational attachment to Edmund. An Oedipal Woman just can't help herself.

Like Fanny Price, Marian's mental strength is challenged by physical weakness—headaches and fatigue for Fanny, temporary anorexia for Marian. In both cases, the weakness is associated with an increase in erotic worth, but from very different perspectives. In Fanny's case, Edmund makes her weakness the focus and justification of his attentions to her, but Peter does not know about Marian's eating problem and would not likely be sympathetic if he did. Her apparently tiny appetite is a sign to him that she is appropriately feminine, but any hint of abnormality would make her less valuable, as her configurations of odd behavior toward him finally do.

**Biology is Messy**

In both the Austen and the Atwood novels, a scene of domestic squalor is presented in grim contrast to the domestic bliss conjured up by the announcement of a felicitous engagement. Sir Thomas sends Fanny home to Portsmouth with the specific intent that she experience enough discomfort to reconsider Henry Crawford's offer of marriage. The physical and emotional texture of the Portsmouth scene has much in common with Marian's visit to Bill and Clara in *Edible Woman*. Both scenes are overrun with children, the biological evidence of primary maternal function. In both cases the house, furniture, and food are
described as unattractive and the great number of children presupposed as the necessary element for such squalor to occur. Both heroines are embarrassed or hesitant about having their more attractive and presentable connections exposed to the people with the numerous and unruly children. In both scenes the narrator attributes the mess to parental weakness of character.

In a consumer culture whose ideals circulate around ordered displays of household goods, children are agents of chaos. While a woman’s Oedipal function, her desirability as mother-wife, gives her value, literal biological motherhood is always potentially destructive, and in both novels, the main responsibility for creating domestic order lies with the female partner. Fanny considers Mrs. Price "a partial, ill-judging parent, a dawdle, a slattern, who neither taught nor restrained her children, whose house was the scene of mismanagement and discomfort from beginning to end, and had no talent, no conversation . . . no curiosity" (390). Marian says that "Clara simply had no practicality, she wasn’t able to control the more mundane aspects of life, like money or getting to lectures on time . . . She simply stood helpless while the tide of dirt rose around her" (36). Clara’s husband Joe, unlike Mr. Price, does his best to help, but he just doesn’t have that woman’s touch.

Marian’s Nurse persona is an important element of the ideal Mommy/lover. Bearing children is an incidental albeit inevitable activity for the Oedipal Woman appropriated by
the lucky suitor. (That Duncan is unlikely to become a father except by some gross inattention to hygiene makes him seem less dangerous than Peter.) Both Marian and Fanny are celebrated for their good sense and cautious ability to organize the chaos of life around them. Their ultimate erotic appeal is constructed not at the site of potential biological motherhood, but in their ability to direct and support while always keeping the potential disarray of real childhood, a memory not far from us all, at bay. Above all, the perfect consumer object must never be exhausted or depleted, also a danger in the practice of biological motherhood. Once consumed by domestic cares, the Oedipal Woman becomes Ordinary Housewife.

The perfect Oedipal Woman makes a happy, orderly little world for her lucky loved one and any others who might subsequently be included under their household umbrella. Jane Austen knew that this woman would need a good income, a well-built home, and a competent staff of cooks and nurses to meet the high expectations of the role of biological mother. The possibility of this kind of household existed for the middle-class woman in Britain and North America well into the 20th century, but after World War II, the demands upon women in the burgeoning middle class to be the perfect Mommy-Woman became absurd, a self-parody, impossible. Shiny household technology only gave her more time to ponder the absurdity of clean laundry as a meaningful pursuit. The real psychological work of mothering as defined for her by Dr.
Spock was all the more difficult because of her isolation. It is not surprising that women in the early 1960s welcomed such works as *The Feminine Mystique*. Although *The Edible Woman* was finished in 1965, before the great wave of public feminist activity hit, the misery that propelled the movement is evident in Marian's perceptions of male-female relations and family life.

North Americans in the early 1960s were increasingly aware of the manipulations of Madison Avenue and also worried about technological invasion. As Atwood's *A Handmaid's Tale* (1985) demonstrates, we got used to technology, advertising, and media manipulation as a way of life (some of us even learned to love it), but the implications of biological motherhood still create fear. This evocation of fear so deftly performed in what critics have called a 20th-century comedy of manners makes *Edible Woman* still intensely engaging. The Portsmouth scenes in *Mansfield Park* are an expression of the same fear of motherhood, a job so likely to be given lavish sentimental lip offerings and meager financial recognition or social support; a job still so likely to be presented as a reasonable alternative to education or other achievements, even for women who are psychologically unsuited or unwilling to be biological mothers. Marian's famous gesture of offering the cake woman to Peter as a substitute for herself appeals to women and will as long as there is the reasonable anxiety that we will be destroyed by our "femininity."
There is a continuous understanding then, from Austen to Atwood, of both the power and the danger of women's position as the means of reproduction. "Unconscious" hardly seems the right word for those wonderful bursts of the irrational that are now so much a part of our (self-)conscious evaluations of ourselves, but, until the new paradigm of people as biotechnology is fully articulated, we must invoke the unconscious as well as the forces of social construction to account for the Oedipal Woman, the kind of girl a real guy wants to marry. Austen, as well as Atwood, was attuned to the expectations that the new and newer middle classes would place on Mommy--she must be sensible, organized, nurturing, the kind of woman a guy feels secure with. Above all, if she is to bear children, she must be able to manage them in a way that conceals their inherently chaotic influence from Dad and any other visitors to the site and never show signs of depletion.

Of course, Margaret Atwood is objecting to this creature's existence and Atwood's fictional writings have become part of a conversation about what men and women can do both as parents and as persons that has intensified over the last thirty years. One of Atwood's best moments in Edible Woman is in the passage where she implies that shopping for a husband is just another consumer decision:

Marian was walking slowly down the aisle, keeping pace with the gentle music that swelled and rippled around her. "Beans," she said. She found the kind
marked "Vegetarian" and tossed two cans into her wire cart. The music swung into a tinkly waltz; she proceeded down the aisle, trying to concentrate on her list. She resented the music because she knew why it was there: it was supposed to lower you into a euphoric trance, lower your sales resistance to the point at which all things are desirable... But just because she knew what they were up to didn't mean she was immune... [I]n some ways they would always be successful: they couldn't miss. You had to buy something sometime. She knew enough about it from the office to realize that the choices between, for instance, two brands of soap or two cans of tomato juice was not what could be called a rational one. In the products, the things themselves, there was no real difference. (176-77)

The first sentence sounds like Marian has suddenly gone from being engaged to taking part in her wedding ceremony, but it's only a trip to the supermarket. The lulling music is like the stories modern consumers are told about the happiness available to them if they will only choose from a range of equally attractive lifestyle packages offered by the dominant culture, a range which still barely includes single-parent families and is far from accommodating homosexual couples. 23

What constituted a rational choice was much clearer for Jane Austen than it is for today's femina economica, who is
still negotiating the dangerous territory of the Oedipal Woman even as nominal rights and opportunities for women have increased significantly. Both Fanny Price's joyful success as a commodity and Marian McAlpin's attempt to position herself as a shopper rather than consumer goods point to an unavoidable reality: women's lives are always complicated by their actual, potential, and symbolic positions as the means of reproduction.
CHAPTER IV
WOMEN AND PROFESSIONAL PERSONHOOD

The two texts I am comparing in this chapter, Jane Austen's *Persuasion* and Margaret Atwood's *Life Before Man*, are less obviously similar than those I compared earlier, with nothing like the female gothic mode or parallel main characters to join them in a reader's mind, but the novels' shared concerns are perhaps the most profound. Both texts deal with social change and class mobility, with the creation of identity through work. Drawing on an analytical distinction between selfhood and personhood, I consider how this distinction is significant in the two novels and what the distinction means to feminist discussions. While no two works could be much more formally dissimilar than *Persuasion* and *Life Before Man*, I will argue that their concerns and conclusions are in complete accord.

The two novels point to an intersection between feminist questions and the pressures of class subjectivity. As gendered subjects belonging to a particular class, both men and women must feel the weight of the past when they try to ignore or subvert the boundaries of permissible action. How men and women are to get along is already mapped by the
conventions of class and gender, even in the post sexual revolution world of Atwood's novels. Situated right at the point of intersection between gender and class issues are the proliferating discourses of professionalism, which allow the smooth and well-regulated passage of those at the lower levels of society--women and working-class men--into the salaried middle class.

The social changes imitated in the Austen and Atwood novels, the rise of naval professionals in *Persuasion* and of working and professional women in *Life Before Man* (i.e., of professionalism as a means of social control), are part of a complex of change in the 164 years between the births of Jane Austen and Margaret Atwood through which intensifying feminist consciousness is a constant. In *Persuasion*, the navy provides "a means for bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of" (19). In *Life Before Man*, Lesje has disappointed her two grandmothers by becoming a paleontologist instead of marrying a lawyer or a shopkeeper and allowing a husband to give her a solid class identity (114). Atwood's generation of women is the first to enjoy the benefits of professional mobility open to Austen's fictional Captain Wentworth a hundred and fifty years earlier. What the aristocracy was to sailors, men remained to women: a privileged class reluctant to share their privilege. To share privilege with those below on the social scale is to threaten one's own identity grounded in
superiority, and there always looms the question of who will do what was previously done by inferiors if they should rise to equality. In a typically Atwood reversal of gender roles and types, Elizabeth's husband, Nate Schoenhof, is the antiprofessional in *Life Before Man*, having given up law to become a toymaker. (It has been noted that the professions began to lose their allure about the time they became accessible to women.24)

Both novels represent a new direction for their author. *Life Before Man* is Atwood's first departure from the broad comedic style that advertises her debt to Austen: this novel is characterized by a ponderous, abject realism. The presence of feminism as a social force in the text speaks in the thoughts of Lesje, one member of a central triangle:

> Even in the women's group she went to in graduate school . . . she'd been cautious . . . According to them, everything was political . . . She'd told her roommate, who was a social historian with tinted granny glasses, that she didn't really have time for the group, as her palynology class was heavier than she'd thought. Neither of them believed this, and shortly afterwards Lesje moved into a single apartment. She couldn't stand the constant attempts to engage her in meaningful dialogue while she was eating her cornflakes or brushing her hair . . . Now she feels it might have been useful to have listened more carefully. (63)

The women in *Life Before Man* have good jobs in a
nontraditional workplace. That a new order has been established is a given in the text. No one is expected to stay home and keep the hearth warm for a male breadwinner. The most domestic of the three central figures is Elizabeth's husband Nate. The main problem for the female characters is not to get into or to get ahead in the workplace, but making sense of their own shifting subjectivities in an ostensibly more open society. Yet, the dynamics of the Royal Ontario Museum are always there, giving form and structure to, indeed, creating the occasion for, their personal pursuits. The text gives erotic campaigns precedence over professional development; a subtext to all depictions of female sexuality is the demands of motherhood. More prominently embedded in the text of Life Before Man is the portrayed failure to connect to previous generations, a sense of the weight of the past.

Like Life Before Man for Atwood, Persuasion introduces a more somber tone for Austen. It considers the harsh dilemma often faced by a 19th-century woman who wanted to enjoy the protection of a stable family order. To marry for love without money was to risk alienating the only security she could count on, the goodwill of her own family. Anne Elliot seems weak and selfish to Captain Wentworth when she bows to family pressure and rejects his first proposal, yet she really has no choice. But Austen rewards Anne's class and gender professionalism by giving her a second chance. Giving Anne Elliot a chance to find emotional and sexual
fulfillment when she has passed the bloom of youth parallels the opening of opportunities to the Captain, who was only a young man off to join the navy when Anne first rejected his proposal. If a man of merit can overcome his social disadvantages by becoming a professional in the navy, Austen seems to imply, why should not the professional conduct of a woman of merit overcome the disadvantage of approaching thirty and reward her with true love?

In *Persuasion*, Austen's narrator mocks the vanity of aristocratic pretensions in Sir Walter Elliot and his daughter, Elizabeth Elliot. They are surface people, concerned with little beyond the appearance of nobility:

"[They] considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy" (4). Anne Elliot is a good character (almost too good, as Austen herself said). Social status is the surface, character is the depth: "Anne, with an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, was nobody with either father or sister" (5). Anne is willing to find an identity both for herself and for those born outside of privilege that does not depend only upon the past, but looks to the future, as the middle class deploys new standards of social worth. Atwood's characters in *Life Before Man* appear to be much freer from social constraint than Austen's, but this detachment from their social cores is not chosen. Circumstances typical to the late 20th century have left them rootless, unanchored, carrying around their personal histories as cumbersome baggage.
Twisting through both texts are the competing issues of class and gender. Austen's narrator has a certain freedom in being able to openly acknowledge the clash between competing class subjectivities, although these are emphasized at the expense of attention to gender inequalities. Atwood, on the other hand, has the more subtle task of showing the strange late 20th-century mentality of a middle class embarrassed by any open suggestion that all citizens are not more or less like them, while inwardly either pleased with their own superiority or wondering if they measure up to some unarticulated social standard. In Atwood's novel, feminism is an acknowledged force, but concern with social class is submerged, ruling surface behavior like the id. Characters think about it a lot, but are careful about voicing their evaluations and insecurities. Elizabeth Schoenhof's Aunt Muriel, the one character in Life Before Man reported to be openly proud of her social position, is toxic. In Persuasion, Sir Walter's snobbery causes Anne Elliot to live alone for many more years than she would have liked, but in Life Before Man, Auntie Muriel has twisted Elizabeth's mind, left her destructive and controlling. From Austen to Atwood, snobbery has gone from being questionable to pathological, in much the way gender bias has in middle-class English-speaking culture at large.

The bottom line for both novels is that women want emotional and sexual satisfaction. To return to Yeats's
thesis, it seems clear that the most important duty of the male characters is to desire the woman and, motivated by desire, to make themselves worthy of a woman's desire, which is always more complicated by economic and social mediation than that of a man, mainly because of women's economic dependence. Whether one speaks of status or subjectivity, the interconnectedness of class and gender is called into play, and the material constant is how one makes a living.

Person and Self

According to Mary-T.B. Dombeck, we in the English-speaking western world tend to neglect the distinction between person and self. Dombeck, a psychotherapist and professor in nursing, has taken this distinction, based on the work of M.U. Maus in 1938 and others later, to structure her discussion of professional personhood. The person is "a member of society, invested with social capacities and responsibilities, . . . the author of actions considered to have a reason," while the self is "a product of social experience, symbolically able to take the role of the other, to look into oneself as in a looking glass; a self capable of reflective self-regard" (41). Of course, selfhood and personhood are not discrete qualities; the two, used by Dombeck as analytical constructs, must always be seen as inseparable on some level, something like the opposite surfaces of a Moebius
band: self and person can be distinguished at any point, but travelling along one side will always take you to the other. Like the Freudian invention of the unconscious, the self/person distinction should be a fruitful source of insight and form for cultural discussions seeking to make sense of social relations.

Shaped by 19th-century Romanticism, 20th-century British and North American literature is marked by the primacy of selfhood; T.S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens, for example, give no indication of their lives as banker or insurance agent in their poems. The display of self defines the person of a poet. A novel that develops the public personhood of a character at the expense of subjective intensity is boring by today's standards. *Life Before Man* is in the tradition of the 20th-century novel, presenting the experiences of the self as what "really" exists behind the frail mask of personhood.

The importance of the self/person distinction for feminist concerns is that women's subjectivity is so often deficient in the resources of personhood. What is identified as the "low self-esteem" of young women in the cultural debates fostered by, for example, the American Association of University Women, can be conceptualized more productively as the need for a sense of public personhood. This essay compares Austen's *Persuasion* and Atwood's *Life Before Man* as sites upon which the question of women and public or professional personhood can be explored.
While the notions of personhood and professionalism are separate, I would suggest that for us in late 20th-century North America, the two are almost conflated—professionalism has come to stand for an earned personhood, the kind most compatible with the doctrines of democracy. When I speak of the professionalism of Austen's heroines, I am referring to a certain codification of personal behavior, what might be called "professional standards" of personhood evident in her characterizations.

**Personhood at Home**

Personhood for a woman in Jane Austen's time was available without leaving the manor. A woman's "rights and consequence" (*Persuasion* 5) were balanced by duties towards community and family, but, from the restlessness always stirring in her novels, one senses Austen's feeling that female personhood is not entirely satisfactory as defined by the roles of wife, mother, and second in command in the household. Nevertheless, the traits of professional womanhood are clearly defined in her texts, and her heroines are always expected to show if not professional performance, at least the potential for it. Those characters who focus their energies on the concerns of selfhood, glorying in personal emotional experience at the expense of their social personhood, are always to be pitied in an Austen novel. Austen's discussions of character, or lack of it, often signal definitions of what can rightly be called "professional personhood."
Elizabeth Elliot's description shows a woman lacking the professional qualities valued by Austen's narrators: Such were Elizabeth Elliot's sentiments and sensations; such the cares to alloy, the agitations to vary, the sameness and the elegance, the prosperity and the nothingness, of her scene of life—such the feelings to give interest to a long, uneventful residence in one country circle, to fill the vacancies which there were no habits of utility abroad, no talents or accomplishments for home, to occupy. (9)

The younger sister, Mary, wife of Charles Musgrove, is given to hypochondria and similarly lacking in the personal resources that would not only give her social value, but enhance the value of her spouse:

Anne could believe, with Lady Russell, that a more equal match might have greatly improved [Charles Musgrove]; and that a woman of real understanding might have given more consequence to his character, and more usefulness, rationality, and elegance to his habits and pursuits. (43)

In a reversal of gender stereotypes worthy of Atwood, Austen says of Sir Walter: "Few women could think more of their personal appearance than he did . . . and Sir Walter Elliot, who united these gifts [beauty and a baronetcy], was the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion" (4). Sir Walter lacks the management skills requisite to the professionally competent landholder:
While Lady Elliot lived, there had been method, moderation, economy, which had just kept him within his income; but with her had died all such right-mindedness, and from that period he had been constantly exceeding it. . . . both father [Sir Walter] and daughter [Elizabeth] seemed to expect that something should be struck out . . . to remove their embarrassments and reduce their expenditure, without involving the loss of any indulgence of taste or pride. (10)

The Elliot's friend Lady Russell is described in a typically Austen fashion as "a woman rather of sound than of quick abilities" (11), "sound abilities" being another Austen signal that her concept of woman as professional household manager is in play. The narrator's description of her could apply to any one of a number of good women in Austen's canon:

She was a benevolent, charitable, good woman, and capable of strong attachments; most correct in her conduct, strict in her notions of decorum, and with manners that were held a standard of good-breeding. She had a cultivated mind, and was, generally speaking, rational and consistent--but she had prejudices on the side of ancestry; she had a value for rank and consequence, which blinded her a little to the faults of those who possessed them. (11)
Thus, the vanity of ascribed importance attributed to
the aristocracy is set both separate from and in opposition
to the professional competencies entailed by the earned
personhood of the ascendant middle classes.

Mrs. Clay, "a clever young woman, who understood the
art of pleasing; the art of pleasing, at least, at
Kellynch-hall" (15), is the counterfeit person, insinuating
her way into the bosom of the Elliot family without the
credentials: "From situation, Mrs. Clay was, in Lady
Russell's estimate, a very unequal, and in her character she
believed a very dangerous companion" (16). As a woman in
flight from an "unprosperous marriage," Mrs. Clay has
already demonstrated her lack of professionalism. It is, of
course, her weak character, her lack of the virtues of a
professional female person, that make her a problem to the
Elliots as the plot progresses: low birth alone can never
make one a villain.

M. Jeanne Peterson, in Family, Love, and Work in the
Lives of Victorian Gentlewomen, traces the fortunes of upper
middle-class Englishwomen through the lives of the women of
a particular family. Her descriptions confirm the strength
of Austen's ideals for professional womanhood in the 19th
century and show how close women of that class were to
becoming professionals outside the home in their own right.
Besides doing parish work, including unpaid teaching of the
poor, and acting as a kind of paraprofessional support to
husbands, a few, including Harriet Martineau, Florence
Nightingale, and George Eliot successfully pursued their interests in writing, art, natural science, or medicine. Yet the "private" sphere of women and the "public" sphere of men were still clearly separate, and all ventures into the public life by women were conducted under the aegis of a husband, father, uncle, or brother and most often involved acting as an extension of the male professional, helping him with his work rather than having her own. In the 20th century, upper middle-class women continued to practice many of the virtues of the Victorian helpmeet, but as Atwood's novels show, preoccupation with the experiences of self come to dominate popular concepts of identity.

Personhood Leaves Home

By 1979, the year Life Before Man was published, feminist activity is only one among many factors that have greatly devalued the personhood available to the middle-class woman at home (already very much in question when Atwood began to publish in the early 1960s). Atwood's female characters have entered the world of work and professional life, but Life Before Man is dominated by the sense of self, in the characters of Elizabeth and Nate Schoenhof. These characters present an exhausted paradigm, one that no longer fits the social and economic facts of life. Nate's return to a menial position in his old law firm brings him full circle (but on a descending spiral) in the exploration of selfhood that peaked in the late 1960s.
Lesje, the woman who defines both her self and her person by her role as paleontologist, is the emergent, not the dominant force in the book, but hers is the most interesting character for the present discussion.

At the present point in women's history, there is very little sense left of the domestic life as personhood. As Dombeck's study implies, our identity as persons is so closely associated with professional identity outside the home that the phrase "professional homemaker" is not to be taken seriously. People are now offered seminars with titles like "The Managerial Parent: A Workshop for Parents and Professionals"—one cannot even hope to get one's children to take one seriously unless one can demonstrate a proficiency parallel to that sought in the workplace. The home is at best a secondary locus of authority for women as well as for men. This is a far cry from both Austen's characters and the real women documented by Peterson, who practiced a virtue in the home that embraced the discourses of professional womanhood while idealizing a companionship between men and women as intellectual and spiritual equals. At this point in history, it is hard for a woman to find satisfaction and a strong sense of personhood in either the home or the workplace still dominated by male standards of success.

In Life Before Man, Elizabeth's Auntie Muriel, a "dinosaur," is the last of the women who find a sense of person in staying home. Elizabeth finds her inscrutable:
With everyone else [Elizabeth] can depend on some difference between surface and interior. Most people do imitations; she herself has been doing imitations for years. If there is some reason for it she can imitate a wife, a mother, an employee, a dutiful relative. The secret is to discover what the others are trying to imitate and then support them in their belief that they've done it well. Or the opposite: I can see through you. But Auntie Muriel doesn't do imitations; either that or she is so completely an imitation that she has become genuine. She is her surface. Elizabeth can't see through her because there is nothing or nowhere to see. She is opaque as a rock. (216-217, emphasis Atwood's)

Auntie Muriel's opacity is typical of generations of women whose home life was their profession ("she's never pretended to be happy" (217)). In this, Auntie Muriel has more in common with Fanny Price or Anne Elliot than she has with her narrative relation of the next generation. (Catherine Morland in Northanger Abbey, with her experiments in "fact" and "fiction," is an early postmodern.) One of the hallmarks of the professional subjectivity, as exemplified by Captain Wentworth, for instance, is the creation of an opaque persona consistent with the values of the professional discipline. Auntie Muriel is just as likely to reply to Why? questions (interrogations of social constructs) with "That's just the way we do it" as Wentworth
is "That's the way we do it in the navy" or a physician, "That's our standard." Opacity is a quality of professional personhood. The character focusing upon selfhood is self-revealing in the process of being self-reflexive and, finally, self-inventive. The penchant for self-invention and a consciousness of switching between various social roles is both a mark of the postmodern sense of identity and a symptom of women's lack of access to strong professional identities.

The Shifting Locus of Personhood

Looking into Persuasion and Life Before Man, one can observe the shifting loci of personhood and selfhood for middle-class women from the time of Austen's writing to Atwood's. In Persuasion, Captain Wentworth's desire for Anne and her response to him are presented as unmediated erotic attraction between two psychologically compatible entities, an attraction thwarted by the familiar disapproving elders, a simple scenario to support the more complex social implications worked out in the plot. Life Before Man presents desire as already complicated by social stratification and individual histories of lack and absence.

The demands and denial of motherhood must always haunt discussions of female subjectivity and professional aspirations. For Austen, biological motherhood and nurturing were important functions for the woman whose personhood was articulated in the home—"A lady, without a family, was the
very best preserver of furniture in the world" (22)--but mothering had large components of education and management for Austen and her peers. She belonged to a social group that routinely assigned most of the care-providing duties of motherhood to nurses and governesses, much as a professional woman today leaves the typing and filing to those of lower rank.

For Austen, mothering was example and education in the conduct of professional personhood, not acting as personal handmaiden and cheerleader. In Mansfield Park, Lady Bertram and Mrs. Price are lacking the professional skills of motherhood. Their incompetence leaves their children short in good sense and unselfish self-discipline, making their passage to personhood more difficult. In post-Freudian Atwood, motherhood is, above all, the scene of guilt and culpability. The kind of motherhood idealized by 1950s sitcoms always implied the pitiful inadequacy of real mothers. A popularized Freudian vocabulary invited children to express their disappointment. Atwood's characters struggle to find expression for the wounds left by emotionally inadequate mothers, going around with deterministic holes in their psyches and little sense of the importance of their public identities.

The past weighs heavily on the characters of both Persuasion and Life Before Man, as it must whenever a social transition is occurring. The phrase "generation gap" applies just as well to the Elliots as to Lesje and her
grandmothers or to Elizabeth and her Aunt Muriel. In *Persuasion*, Sir Walter Elliot and Lady Russell represent an old feudal order in which social roles were fixed. The distinction between self and person was much less useful in an order that did not allow for the acquisition of more than one possible adult identity. Anne's identity was considered by the older generation to be fixed: she was an aristocratic female of a certain rank. That she could acquire a different identity, as opposed to losing the only one she had, by marrying Wentworth is too new an idea for those characters in the novel who react to social change by hanging on to the past.

In *Life Before Man*, Lesje, who embodies the emergent subjectivity characterized by the ascendance of professional personhood over selfhood, is acutely attached to the very distant past. This inner obsession with her professional object of study is very new, especially for a female character in a 20th-century novel. At the same time, Atwood's choice of a profession dealing in prehistory for Lesje creates a counterpoint serving to emphasize the novel's post-Freudian search for origins of selfhood in personal history. Elizabeth, Nate, and Lesje are psychologically surrounded by their ancestors much as Anne Elliot is literally surrounded by the artifacts of her family history, especially portraits. But to the late 20th-century imagination, Chris, whose fictitious Native-French heritage so inimical to that of Auntie Muriel makes him attractive to Elizabeth, is interesting. Lesje's
first boyfriend, William, whose history is a given already deployed in his WASP identity, is not.

**Nate - The Quest for Nonprofessional Personhood**

The three central characters in *Life Before Man* are a highly readable trilogy with respect to the movement of personhood, as well as to the altering paradigms of desire from Austen's writings to Atwood's. Nate Schoenhof is the antitype to Austen's Captain Wentworth. Austen was writing just as the discourses of professionalism had begun to take full social effect, while Atwood was already documenting their temporary decline as the preferred construction of male identity in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This brief decline, of course, was followed by the wholesale professionalization of every level of working life. In the Romantic spirit of the 1960s, Nate had chosen to cultivate a "self" rather than the personhood ascribed to his professional training as an attorney--he had chosen to make his living as a toymaker. However, by the time of the telling of the narrative, he has begun to say that he's "in the toy business" rather than that he makes handmade wooden toys in his basement (42). He likes to spend time in a working-class bar watching and discussing the news, the elections, or the football game on TV, participating in conventional male personhood in spite of having given up his profession.
His desires for his wife, Elizabeth, for his mistress, Martha, and for his third woman, Lesje, are a history of his choice not to be the professional person he started out to be:

Occasionally, though by no means all the time, Nate thinks of himself as a lump of putty, helplessly molded by the relentless demands and flinty disapprovals of the women he can't help being involved with. Dutifully, he tries to make them happy. He fails not because of any intrinsic weakness or lack of will, but because their own desires are hopelessly divided. And there's more than one of them, these women. They abound, they swarm. (41, my emphasis)

He became an attorney to please his mother. The toymaker choice was his own, as was that of the legal receptionist, Martha, as his mistress--both ways to embrace the concrete, the ordinary, as opposed to the abstract, the elite.

The "hopelessly divided" desires of the women he is close to, especially Elizabeth's wanting both the "forceful, aggressive lawyer" and the "sensitive, impoverished artist" (41), reflect back his own dividing and multiplying desires and, ultimately, the division and multiplication of subjectivities and personhoods available to the women he desires.

Nate is presented first as Elizabeth's prey, always under the power of her rhetorical and managerial talents,
talents apparently only minimally challenged or exercised by her position at the Museum. Martha is no match for Elizabeth, and so finally no match for Nate. He imagines in Lesje something new:

Someplace utterly unlike the country inside Elizabeth's blue dressing gown, or the planet of Martha, predictable, heavy and damp. Holding Lesje would be like holding some strange plant, smooth, thin, with sudden orange flowers. Exotics, the florists called them. The light would be odd, the ground underfoot littered with bones. Over which she would have power. She would stand before him, the bearer of healing wisdom, swathed in veils. He would fall to his knees, dissolve. (71)

Early in his relationship with Elizabeth, Nate had fantasized her inside the Museum "sitting like a Madonna in a shrine, shedding a quiet light" (49). He now imagines Lesje going to work "where she does incomprehensible things, disappears at intervals into the ladies' room" (72). Both women are idealized and eroticized at the work site. Nate has not been able to find his own satisfaction or other men he can look up to in the legal profession, but, having abandoned professional life himself (a revolt imaged in his affair with Martha), he seems to be searching for some special competence or knowledge in Lesje that he once had sought and failed to find in Elizabeth.
The vigorous middle-class optimism of Austen's Captain Wentworth is not available to Nate. He is caught in a dreary selfhood, searching for a sense of identity and substance in the lives of the women he desires. His desire is always directed by his own weak sense of personhood searching for wholeness or completion in another. The Nate character typifies Atwood's fondness for reversing gender stereotypes (a profound, remninst gesture) and illustrates neatly Jónasdóttir's thesis as outlined in Chapter I: in Western societies, someone who is emotionally put upon and called to sustain and nurture the success of another as a way of life cannot expect to be allowed to act with authority as a social being (Jónasdóttir notes that women are allowed influence, but the opposition starts when they try to assume authority (29)). While Atwood demonstrates that the female (Elizabeth) can be the one in a relationship who takes without giving, her text gives way to the pressures of what is considered natural by society at large, and Nate is soon doing his best to put Lesje into the kind of miserably exploited state he has endured himself.

Elizabeth - Pathological Selfhood

A woman like Elizabeth fits the old pattern—her social identity comes from her family connections and her choice of a mate, not from her professional choices. Her erotic path is guided by the unflagging goal of outraging Auntie Muriel. Still, she has a kind of competence ("she doesn't have to
try; she always tries" (14)) that gives her an edge in her universe of home and Museum. She handles all personal relationships as a management challenge. *Life Before Man* is about how her ex-lover, Chris, uses a dramatic suicide to disrupt and destroy her habits of management, apparently opening the way for her devalued husband to break away as well.

Elizabeth is a predator, a selfhood that would have been condemned by an Austen narrator, not explored as an object of interest. The Austen heroine represents the triumph of middle-class professionalism, the power of the proper exercise of domestic personhood. In the late 1970s, at the time of the writing of *Life Before Man*, a specifically nondomestic professionalism was beginning to emerge as the site of power for women, but the Elizabeth character is represented as still caught in the old pattern: "She's no more interested in elections than she is in football games. Contests between men, both of them, in which she's expected to be at best a cheerleader" (59). She has neither found a sufficiently productive exercise of her talents at the Museum nor married well enough to be installed at a level of domestic splendor that would tax her abilities.

Elizabeth is written as the central consciousness of the text, the vortex that wants to swirl everything into its own pattern. She is perverse talent and energy directed into an adventure of revenge. A salient aspect of her story
is the difference between the appearance of "haute Wasp" good breeding and the actual nightmare of her mother's alcoholism and Elizabeth's adoption by Auntie Muriel and Uncle Ted. Every sexual relationship or passing affair is fueled by its envisioned power to affront the hated stepmother-aunt. Her talent for management has become the relentless impulse to control others. Her competence, her self-possession, and her loss of power caused by Chris's suicide all come out in an imaginary dialogue with a psychiatrist (she cancels the appointment):

Yes, I know I've suffered an unusual shock. I'm quite aware of that, I can feel the waves. I realize it was an act directed ostensibly at me though not really at me, childhood imprints being what they are, although I can't say I know of any in his case that would account for it. He had a bad childhood but who didn't? I also realize that my reactions are normal under the circumstances and that he intended me to feel guilty and that I am not really guilty. Of that. I'm not sure whether or not I do feel guilty. I feel angry from time to time; otherwise I feel devoid. I feel as though energy is being constantly drained out of me, as though I'm leaking electricity. I know I'm not responsible and that there's little I could have done and that he might have killed me or Nate or the children instead of himself. I knew that at the time, and no, I did not phone the police or the mental
hygiene authorities. They wouldn't have believed me. I know all these things.

I know I have to keep on living and I have no intention of doing otherwise. You don't have to worry about that. If I were going to take a carving knife to my wrists or do a swan dive off the Bloor Street Viaduct I'd have done it before now. I'm a mother if not exactly a wife and I take that seriously. I would never leave an image like that behind for my children. I've had that done to me and I didn't like it.

No, I don't want to discuss my mother, my father, my Auntie Muriel or my sister. I know quite a lot about them as well. I've already been down this particular yellow brick road a couple of times, and what I found out mostly was that there's no Wizard of Oz. My mother, my father, my aunt and my sister did not go away. Chris won't go away either.

I am an adult and I do not think I am merely the sum of my past. I can make choices and I suffer the consequences, though they aren't always the ones I foresaw. That doesn't mean I have to like it.

No thank you. I don't want pills to help me through. I don't wish to have my mood changed. I could describe this mood to you in detail but I'm not sure that would be of any benefit either to you or to myself. (98-99)
The character displayed here creates the impression that for all her imitations, she is as opaque to others as Auntie Muriel has always been to her. One cannot help feeling it a shame that all that self-sufficient grip on things could not have been channeled into a CEO position or some other bona fide public personhood to which her lack of affective weakness would be an asset.

Lesje - The Emergent Paradigm of Woman as Professional

Lesje's naivete about the subtleties of class distinctions in a democratic society are parallel to her unexamined professional life. Although she has experienced the gender bias in her field first-hand, that she is both a woman and a paleontologist has little conscious significance to her until she perceives her job threatened by a pregnancy ("A pregnant paleontologist is surely a contradiction in terms" (308)). Her worldly wise Jewish friend explains Elizabeth Schoenhof for her:

"Haute Wasp [sic]," says Marianne, "is when you don't have to give a piss. Haute Wasp is when you have this tatty carpet that looks like hell but cost a million bucks; and only a few people know it. . . ."

Lesje feels she'll never be able to master nuances like these. . . . Maybe Nate Schoenhof is haute Wasp, though somehow she doesn't think so. He's too hesitant, he talks too much, he looks around the room at the wrong moments. He probably doesn't even know what haute Wasp means.
Maybe Elizabeth doesn't either. Maybe this is part of being haute Wasp: you don't have to know.

"What about Chris?" she says. Surely the fact of Chris does not fit in with Marianne's definition.

"Chris?" says Marianne. "Chris was the chauffeur."

(96-97)

The reader does not see Lesje aware that "haute Wasp" is the social parallel of "white male" in the professions--that only those who occupy the position of privilege can afford to act as if there were a natural order that no one would think of examining or articulating. The text of the novel does not explain how Lesje ended up in graduate school to study paleontology. She is living at a time when her natural interest in the subject--for a paper about her summer vacation, she had handed in an account describing her rock collection--apparently provided sufficient momentum. As a character, she is not nearly as accessible or fully realized as Elizabeth or even Nate. For Atwood, the man with "feminine" traits is easier to render than the woman who has the stereotypically masculine interest in rocks and bones. Lesje has the mystery a science person often holds for those steeped in the liberal arts, but she is also the mysterious harbinger of things to come, of a time when women will grow up pursuing interests other than the traditional jobs or childbearing. She represents the potential for a new development or perhaps even a radical alteration in Yeats's formula for mediated desire. Lesje,
however, falls into the ancient trap and it is left for a minor character to show the way out.

For most of her life, Lesje's desire is not "for the desire of the man." At puberty, Elizabeth Schoenhof was seeking out young toughs, not so much to affirm her identity as a woman as to affirm her identity as not-Auntie Muriel; at fourteen Lesje was dreaming of discovering her own dinosaur and having it named *Aliceosaurus* after the anglicized form of her name (194). In her adult life, she habitually seeks psychological refuge by putting herself in vivid fantasies of prehistoric life. Until she decides that she has fallen in love with Nate, "eating, sleeping, or copulating" are three ordinary appetites.

Nate and Lesje fall in love each with the other's attractive construction of the other's wisdom or beauty. "Falling in love" degrades the quality of Lesje's life in almost every way. Her former boyfriend, William, was bland, but he didn't interfere with her work or her comfort in her own home. Once women no longer need men to support them or give them children, it is not clear what positive function they do have in women's lives, apart from giving physical and emotional pleasure.

"Falling in love" brings Lesje into physical discomfort and disorder. "Falling in love" brings Lesje to the point of final despair, but instead of committing suicide, she decides to have a child to compete for the attention bottomlessly consumed by Nate's two daughters, who visit weekends and other inconvenient times.
In one scene, Martha, whom Lesje has just witnessed lunching in the Museum cafeteria with "Queen Elizabeth," warns Lesje not to "'let [Nate and Elizabeth] do a job on you . . . Let them start and they'll turn your head to mush. Fight back. Give 'em hell'" (242).

In the spirit of scientific inquiry, Lesje examines the evidence once her initial feelings of triumph have passed:

For at least fifteen minutes Lesje is elated. She's been vindicated; her own perceptions, which she has increasingly begun to distrust and even to disown, are possibly valid. Back in her office, though, replaying the conversation, it occurs to her that Martha may have had one or two ulterior motives.

Also: Martha didn't say what she's supposed to fight back against, or how. Martha obviously fought back herself. But it's to be noted—a hard fact—that Martha is not currently living with Nate. (242) Lesje is unable to think past the trap of desire, in spite of her habits of reflection. She does not see the whole picture. Although the situation with Nate has made her miserable on almost every front, she has come to value living with him as the ultimate prize.

Martha, the old girlfriend, gets into yoga, becomes involved with a rape crisis center, and plans to study law instead of trying to become entangled with Nate again once she has gotten him a job at his old law firm so he can accept the financial responsibilities of "falling in love".
He threw away a promising career, everyone said it was promising though they didn't say what it promised. He wanted to make honest things, he wanted his life to be honest, and all he has now is the taste of sawdust in his mouth. (243)

While Martha is riding the wave of feminism just as it is about to beach (in Nate's estimation), she is the only character left with any unalloyed hope at the end of the novel. She has figured out how to "fight back. Give 'em hell." Against the principles of unrestrained selfishness and desire cut loose from personhood, she has exercised restraint and the pursuit of a worthwhile public personhood, just as Jane Austen (like Mary Wollstonecraft) would have counseled her to do, were she alive in 1979 and living in Margaret Atwood's novel.

That Jane Austen and Margaret Atwood are in agreement on the value of an active, disciplined, public personhood for women, as for men, highlights an essential similarity between the authors that is not quite self-evident. Both Austen and Atwood illustrate over and over again that the problem of "the desire of the woman which is for the desire of the man" is to be taken seriously; the two authors have complementary agendas. Austen is known for rewarding characters like Anne Elliot who do not let their sexual needs take priority over the duties of professional upper middle-class personhood and who are not fooled into believing that simply captivating a man of the right class
and income will give them a personhood of lasting value. The message of the Lesje character in *Life Before Man* (messages are everywhere) is that the notion of consciousness raising for women will never be out of date ("Now she feels it might have been useful to have listened more carefully" (63)). As our ideas of what constitutes an elevated consciousness are constantly being revised and in some sense determined by the discourses of professional psychology, sociology, law, medicine, and the notion of professionalism itself, one of the most important tasks ahead for women is to think deeply and speak clearly on the definitions of personhood for themselves, definitions that must always take into account the ancient curse of "the desire of the woman which is for the desire of the man."
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSIONS

--Le plaisir du texte, c'est le moment oú mon corps va suivre ses propres idées--car mon corps n'a pas les mêmes idées que moi.

Barthes 1973, p. 30

The ideas in this dissertation moved from a light, although serious, and happy engagement with the female gothic to a more arduous kind of pleasure in grappling to articulate something useful about women and professionalism. I wanted to say something about matters important to me as a feminist, a reader, and a writer. In the course of my studies, certain notions had taken on an insistent vividness: the line from Yeats, the gothic potential of the workplace, the Mommy function, professional personhood. Long before the appearance of Anna G. Jónasdóttir's book in response to the question, I was asking myself why women are still oppressed and, in fact, often seem to choose to be. Yeats seemed to have accounted for it in his note: "the desire of the woman . . . is for the desire of the man." Like Jónasdóttir, I had pinpointed the locus of (complicit) oppression in the heterosexual relationship between men and women.
women; economic, legal, and social inequities are symptoms of an imbalance at the heart of things. Like Jónasdóttir, I found documentation in fiction of the appropriation of female emotional energies that empowers men while draining women.

The line from Yeats that gives this dissertation its title is a formal connection between the three essays; Jónasdóttir's fleshing out of the notion in a particular, material direction adds more than a formal connection, enlivening the theme with the theorizing of women's daily experience. Implied in my comparison of the three pairs of novels by Austen and Atwood is a commonality in the way that the two authors address this experience, which in terms of Jónasdóttir's formulation has remained relatively coherent. The gothic anxiety called forth by women's seeking a place in a world owned and managed by men, the middle-class product standards operating in the reflexes of both potential or symbolic and literal motherhood, and middle-class professional standards operating in both domestic and public domains are matters that could not have been inscribed in women's fiction very much before Jane Austen's time. Atwood writes these social currents into her fiction, addressing the problems for women of desire and emotional appropriation on a continuum from Austen.

My goal was to engage a reader in the six novels by Jane Austen and Margaret Atwood in ways that would refresh and stimulate the feminist impulse. The act of reading as
an act of interpretation and rewriting is demonstrated and celebrated. Women's readings of literary texts and of their own social contexts can be a continuum, a mental joining of the lives represented by the text and the lives they read every day to survive. Simply making sense of a bad situation can be self-defeating, perpetuating wrongs. Vigorous reading, on the other hand, touches the sore spots, uncovers another way to view a situation, is free to add whatever makes sense and to challenge or rewrite what doesn't. Gathering from both expected and unexpected sources, I have read, rewritten, and extended both the content and contexts of six important novels. Each essay contains the germ of at least one more.
NOTES

1. Jane Austen is often cited as excelling at the comedy of manners. This observation was also made of Margaret Atwood by British critics (McCombs 68), George Woodcock (93) and others (180), mainly regarding The Edible Woman.

2. From the well known conclusion of Foucault's The Order of Things:
   One thing in any case is certain: man is neither the oldest nor the most constant problem that has been posed for human knowledge. Taking a relatively short chronological sample within a restricted geographical area--European culture since the sixteenth century--one can be certain that man is a recent invention within it. . . . As the archeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end. (386-387)

Foucault says that Man did not exist before the end of the eighteenth century.

3. Ellen Moers quotes Mary Wollstonecraft both in her voice as a feminist and as the voice of literary feminism, or heroinism:

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"Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience; but as blind obedience is ever sought for power, tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavor to keep a woman in the dark, because the former want only slaves, and the latter a plaything" [from A Vindication of the Right of Women]. (122)

And on heroism:

"In delineating the Heroine of this Fiction, the Author attempts to develop a character different from those generally portrayed" [from the preface to Wollstonecraft's first novel, Mary, a Fiction]. (123)

Of the arrays of feminism deployed since Wollstonecraft, none seems to me to fit the literary feminist activities of both Austen and Atwood so well.

4. Foucault, when pressed, used an earlier date for the end of Man. I use 1968 because it was a watershed year for social activism in general and for feminism in particular. The United States assimilated so much aesthetic and social revolt around that time that it was zapped into the postmodern age.

5. The first title of this paper was "How will they get Along? Women and Men in Austen and Atwood." Although the paper took another turn, my original direction was brought to mind by Jónasdóttir's emphasis on the necessity to theorize relationships between the sexes as the site of women's continued oppression:
Regardless of whether psychoanalysis or a theory of ideology is used, these studies tell us a great deal about how women and men are formed into different sexual characters. . . . But these studies do not focus on what must compose the crux of any theory of male authority, which, as I see it, is in the relations between man and woman and women and men.

(20)

6. Susan J. Rosowski quotes Atwood as observing, "'[W]e've been so cut off from our social mythology that we hardly know what it is; that's one thing that has to be discovered'" (McCombs 197). Atwood's unfinished dissertation was called "The English Metaphysical Romance" (Keith 10).

7. From Griffin Wolff's Note 3 in Fleenor (303):

8. Wm. Patrick Day notes that although parody is usually used to comic or satiric ends, its essential characteristic as a literary technique is the creation of doubles:
   The parodist begins with the original and produces a copy that renders it ludicrous or monstrous . . . . It is, then, a literary device that perfectly embodies
the mystery basic to Gothic fantasy. Out of one thing comes two; the second subverts the first but is dependent upon it. (59-60)

Day also remarks that gothic fiction parodies realist fiction. This would make Northanger Abbey and Lady Oracle second-degree parodies.

9. Michael Beard develops this notion in his discussion of the Iranian novelist Heydayat as a western writer.

10. The female gothic has declined in popularity, judging by the grocery store book rack covers. It is now considered a small subgenre by romance publishers. This is a sign that the world of men and their business is not as interesting to women as it was when women were more excluded from it.

11. See note 8.

12. As exaggerated as the Isabella Thorpe character is, she probably resembles many living women Austen had encountered. A sad thought. Anne Henry Ehrenpreis, on the other hand, has found that both Isabella and Camilla Stanley, a character from a juvenile sketch by Austen, resemble Clarintha Ludford. Clarintha, who appears in Ethelinde, or the Recluse of the Lake (1789) by Charlotte Smith, may have shared with Austen's characters "her affected style of conversation, her empty protestations of friendship for the heroine, her extravagant expressions of false opinions" (346).
13. The word "quiz," judging from the most recent version of the Oxford English Dictionary, was used by Austen in Northanger Abbey in the sense of "an odd or eccentric person, in character or appearance" or "[a]n odd-looking thing." The OED gives an example from Northanger Abbey to illustrate the second sense: "Where did you get that quiz of a hat?" The word as used by the silly Thorpe characters seems to have been some slang currently popular with young persons who considered themselves worldly and in a position to laugh at most of the rest of the world.

14. Wm. Day notes that "enthrallment" in the gothic world is an assertion of the unity of desire and fear. He says, "Jane Austen's Catherine Moreland [sic] seems to have drunk so deeply from the spring that she has become, at least temporarily, intoxicated with the thought that the Gothic world might be the real one" (67-68).

15. The notion of gynesis as developed by Alice Jardine is included in my personal canon of feminist thought. When I say "gynocentric," I have her concept in mind: gynesis--the putting into discourse of "woman" as the process diagnosed in France as intrinsic to the condition of modernity; indeed the valorization of the feminine, woman, and her obligatory, that is, historical, connotations, as somehow intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing, speaking. The object produced by this process is neither a
person or a thing, but a horizon, that toward which the process is tending: a gynema. (25)

16. Joanna Russ has noted that the modern female gothic frequently builds a plot around the suspicion that an apparently pleasant and normal husband is trying to kill his wife, the heroine (Fleenor 31-56).

17. Michael Riffaterre makes this explicit for Pride and Prejudice:

In Pride and Prejudice, for instance, the female protagonist visits a country estate in the absence of its owner, who wants to marry her and whose offer she has spurned. She admires the tasteful layout of the grounds, the elegant splendor of the manor house. The reader is led to believe that he is looking at things through her eyes, whereas in fact he is made to witness the objectifying of her libido. (14)

18. Atwood's attempts in Bodily Harm to portray third world have-not characters do not seem altogether satisfactory to me. The most memorable is a Martha-like character (i.e., similar to Martha in Life Before Man), Lora, who is, relatively speaking, only a little lower on the global social scale than a typical Atwood heroine.

19. The notion of the "good enough" mother comes from D.W. Winnicott, who was of the opinion, "If a child can play with a doll, you can be an ordinary devoted mother" (Doane and Hodges 21).
20. Many critics express hatred for Fanny and Edmund. In an annotated bibliography, the phrases "insipid and unconvincing," "something badly wrong," "improbable plot," "both odious," "prig," and "leaden and witless" are all applied in a few pages of entries (Roth and Weinsheimer).

21. Jane Aiken Hodge notes that "Jane Austen's early experience with publishers was unlucky (188)." She earned less than £700 in her lifetime, much less than many other writers of the time. Evangelical themes were very popular for women's edification at the time Mansfield Park was written. Although Warren Roberts believes evangelicalism had a salutary influence on Austen that was manifest in her last three books, especially Mansfield Park, her attitudes toward relations between the sexes remain constant as far as I can tell.

22. By the "modern" aversion to motherhood, I mean the absence of children in the novels of such modernists as D.H. Lawrence, Hemingway, and Virginia Woolf.

23. Some legislators in Minnesota want to cut welfare by getting men and women back together in nuclear families. One actually suggested a welfare dating service. Although one's first impulse is to ignore such nonsense, it won't go away. Thus, the notion warrants rigorous examination with respect to the worth of women's work.
as the means of reproduction and nurturing. Legislators might try to discover what motivates women who live with children without husbands before planning "solutions."

24. An MD who delivered my fourth child first pointed out to me that the high-prestige professions were losing their status as increasing numbers of women enter them. She also noted that the average salary for MDs has been going down.

25. Jónasdóttir states, however, that economic dependence is not the significant issue today:

In our society neither women's economic dependence on men nor the unequal division of work between the sexes constitutes the pivotal point in men's continuing ability to maintain and regenerate their dominance over women and in society at large. The crux of the problem lies on the level of existential sexual needs, which are materially and socially formed, and basically not economic. The activities that the sexual struggle revolves around are neither work nor the products of work but human love—caring and ecstasy—and the products of these activities: we ourselves, living women and men with all our needs and all our potential. (24)

26. This workshop was held in Grand Forks, ND, Oct. 26, 1993. Advertised with this event was a community meeting on Oct. 25 with Dr. John K. Rosemond, who pooh-poohed the professional parenthood doctrines, which
doctrines were defended in the local newspaper by columnist Gale Stewart Hand.

27. As M. Jeanne Peterson shows, "doing science" was a favorite Victorian activity, even for middle-class women. Little of this shows up in novels for and by women, however. Recent best-sellers by doctors and lawyers have included details of their professional duties embedded in sensational tales.

28. Atwood's attitude of combined reverence and wryness toward the mysteries of the scientific mind come across clearly in her acknowledgments and in Stephen, the brother character in Cat's Eye.
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